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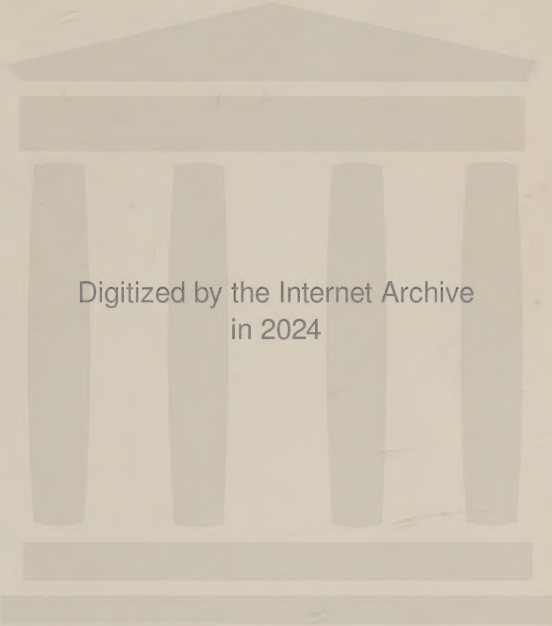
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EMERALD TRAILS

EMERALD TRAILS

By

JACKSON GREGORY

2563

AUTHOR OF

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TO MY GODDAUGHTER

VIRGINIA LEE STEWART

EMERALD TRAILS

EMERALD TRAILS

CHAPTER I

HORSE and rider went rocketing through the night, bent upon some wild, reckless errand. The dimmest of dim trails was underfoot, for, though the sky was clear and softly luminous with moon and stars, but little light found its way to filter through the overhead, interlacing boughs of pine and fir. Yet through the thick forest gloom man and beast went on, up abrupt hills, down sharply pitching slopes, with a fine headlong rush and almost in silence, for the hoof-beats were muffled by the thick earth-covering of fallen leaves. The man's coat was blown back by the speed of his riding; the soft, black hat-brim was bent up against the crown as though held there by a pin; dark shadows made a mystery of his face as they did of the hidden woods all about him and yielded no hint of what dire need or hot impulse bore him along in such urgent haste.

One rode thus in desperate need for a doctor or in fleeing for his life—or to come up with some rare good fortune which fled on ahead. With no check upon the reins, horse and rider plunged into a pitch-dark canyon, splashed across a mountain stream whose wild course was not unlike their own for zest and dash, forsook the dim trail for a bit of open meadow; here was a place of springy turf underfoot and alder thickets about them, with yonder, straight ahead, a bare slope rising

gently toward a tree-crested ridge. For the first time the man spoke.

"Easy does it, Nabob! Think I don't know you'd run yourself clean to death if I let you? Well, I won't, old boy. Here's our last hill, and I'll bet you a bag of barley we're on time."

In the dark, with the look on a man's face hid, something may be gleaned from his voice; his intonation hints at himself and at his errand. Here, now, was a voice not to be readily forgotten, once heard, so vastly pleasant and agreeable was it, so rich with rare good humor. One could speak in no such tone unless he smiled. The rider tightened his reins as he spoke; from a headlong rush the horse was brought down to a mincing, curvetting walk. The erect form in the saddle leaned forward and a light hand patted the moist shoulder of the animal that carried him. Here was a touch for any horse or dog to understand, like a whispered "Thanks, old boy!" and Nabob turned his head and for an instant rubbed his muzzle against his master's leg. Then they went forward again, taking the long slope at a swift, easy walk.

Among the pines topping the ridge they came upon a road, or rather upon wheel tracks which in this part of the California backwoods served upon occasion as a road. Hereabouts most men in the greater part of their journeyings went on horseback, and if a burden were to be carried it went upon pack-animals. Vehicles were few; some old-fashioned two-wheeled carts, a sprinkling of spring-wagons, an occasional buckboard. Only infrequently did their creaking complaints awaken the woodland echoes. To-night, however, some sort of conveyance was apparently expected,

for the horseman sitting silent in the thickest of the shadows by the roadside, softly commanding his horse to be still, fell straightway into that natural attitude of one who listens intently; and presently, at the first distant sound of dry spokes rattling, chuckled a bit to himself.

"We're right on the dot, Nabob, old boy," he said in that same vastly good-humored voice, the voice of a man given to ready laughter in much that he does. "Little Joe Cole's cart; we know every creak and whine of it, don't we? And now to be ready for him and his passenger!"

Preparations were of the simplest and briefest. A very large neck-handkerchief was untied only to be retied about the face just under the eyes. The up-thrust hat-brim was pulled low down. A coiled rope was taken down from its place on the saddle, a slight readjustment made where a holster had slipped a trifle too far back upon the leathern belt.

The cart came creaking on; shod hoofs rang out on a bit of hard ground; a voice, high-pitched and rapid, heard now for the first time, became clearer at every moment. The hill was steepening before them and they came on more slowly.

"In a minute now we'll be atop of Saddle Mountain, mister," Joe Cole's racing words explained. "Mostly down-hill from here on and it ain't more'n seven mile fu'ther. Like I was tellin' you—" He broke off here to cluck and whistle at his old mare, along whose fat and lazy back the reins were constantly slap-slap-slap-ping; then, with no acceleration of the very inconsiderable speed apparent, but in the tone of one who had carried his point, he ran on: "Like I was tellin' you, it's

a land o' peace and plenty, and a poem ought to be wrote about it. Yessir. Now, take me; I'm a readin' man and what's more, I got a trick of rememberin' what I read, and you can take it from me it ain't everybody——"

"It's a land of slow going," protested Joe Cole's passenger in a deep, rumbling, yet not unpleasant voice; already, without doubt, he had had ample opportunity to discover that if a man wanted to make an observation he had best be about it without waiting for a break in Cole's conversational flow. "That's about all I can make of it in the dark. I believe I could have done better walking. We're hours late already."

Joe Cole clucked and slapped with his reins and whistled; the mare plodded serenely on. Her ears bobbed up above the crest and a moment later she herself, the cart, and its occupants came within sight of the man waiting for them.

"What if we are late?" queried Joe Cole with his dry cackle. "The longer folks wait the gladder they feel when you come. If I was a poet—which I ain't, and maybe not because I didn't have it in me—given a show I'd——"

"Hands up!" a commanding voice rang out. "Live-ly, boys!"

There was a rush among the shadows, and out into the roadway, in the thin, clear light of moon and stars, swept horse and rider. To emphasize the fact that here was an affair of a certain sober earnestness, a pistol-shot punctuated the last words of the curt command. Later, several hours later, in fact, Joe Cole maintained stoutly that he felt the wind of the bullet fan his ear! Above the racket of Nabob's pounding hoofs **were**

heard the whir and swish of a rope; the wide noose fell with the neatest precision about one of the forms in the cart, and the voice which had so rudely interrupted Cole's speculations called out sharply:

"I've got you, Joe Cole!" There was a break here as though the speaker half choked or stifled a sneeze. And, oddly, the voice was not to be recognized as that of the man talking alone with his horse; perhaps a handkerchief fastened across a man's mouth might cause the voice to sound like that of another man altogether. After this brief pause he continued ferociously: "I've got you, Joe Cole—and who knows what I'm going to do with you? What if I cut your liver out? What if I skin you alive?"

A shivery wail went up from Joe Cole, the plaint of a most thoroughly frightened man. And at the same time a deep, rumbling protest was heard from his seat companion, shouting mightily:

"You've got the wrong man——"

But he was not to be heard out. A twitch on Nabob's reins set him backing off, tightening the rope despite all protest, and a second later there sat but one man in the cart, while the other came tumbling to the earth.

"You other man," called the horseman sharply, "be off with you while I give you the chance. And you can tell any you like that I've got Joe Cole at last, that they'll never see little Joe again, or if they do they won't know him——"

From the man on the ground, as though jolted out of him by the fall, burst the words:

"I tell you you're making a mistake——"

Away, as though the devil were after him, as no

doubt he thought was the case, went Joe Cole in the cart, standing up now, slapping his reins like mad, lashing out with his whip, shouting shrilly to his old mare and urging her from walk to trot, from trot to gallop, and, at the end, as they swept out of sight, into a lumbering run. A great shout of laughter followed him, and, after the laughter, suddenly smothered, a couple of pistol-shots to urge him on his way. And now the horseman turned to his captive, who had got to his feet and was struggling with the rope which had fallen over his shoulders and so bound both arms tight to his sides.

"Take it easy, friend," he said soothingly. "No sense fighting a half-inch rope. Besides," he added reflectively, "I've got the drop on you, you know."

"Go to blazes with your half-inch rope and your drop on me," cried the other angrily. "What do you mean by this sort of thing? Can't you understand English? Don't you realize yet that you've got the wrong man? That's Joe Cole yelling himself out of sight in his crazy cart. My name is Random."

"Exactly," came the smooth rejoinder. "A very distinguished gentleman, in fact, and none other than the celebrated English poet, Sir Charles Random. Quite so. Sir Charles Random on his belated way to address the Ladies' Suffering Society of Redwood Center. While the other gentleman, now whooping and screeching out of sight, is none other than little Joe Cole, the biggest liar west of the Rocky Mountains, who'll tell his tallest lie to-night."

The prisoner, Random, hoping to take his captor napping, sprang forward, thinking thus to slacken the rope binding him and so be free of its noose. But the

orseman had his wits about him, for all his easy flow of jocularity, and, further, Nabob knew well the trick of a taut rope.

"Blast you," shouted Random, "come down off your horse, give me an even break, and I'll beat you into a pulp!"

Nabob backed off, watchful of eye and most thoroughly proficient and skilful at this sort of work, while his rider exclaimed pleasantly:

"For a poet and a regular swell, you amaze me! A man like you running around the country making speeches to women's clubs? Not that I ever put a rope over a poet before, but— Take it easy," he warned coolly, "else, you get rolled good and plenty."

For Random, fists balled but of necessity held low to his sides, charged with a deep, thundering roar, obviously bent upon having his captor out of the saddle for a speedy rough-and-tumble end of all argument. But the mounted man had the advantage and clearly meant to keep it.

"No you don't!" he shouted cheerily, and with a quick touch of the spur sent Nabob dancing off to a safe distance, again whipping the rope tight, causing Random to spin about and to be jerked helplessly several feet after him.

"Well!" snapped the other. "What now? You've done your crazy stunt, trying to frighten a new tenderfoot with a bit of old-fashioned, silly, worn-out, childish horse-play; if you're through with me suppose you take your rope off and let me be on my way. I'm late enough as it is."

"You've got me wrong, friend; altogether. You're coming along with me now; gentle or rough, you're coming just the same."

"Where? And, for the love of Heaven, why?"

"About six miles, for part answer. On foot, dragged along at the end of a rope—or on horseback, just as you say. Which is it to be?"

Random appeared to reflect.

"Bring on your horse," he grunted. "I'll ride. You might let me get my hat, though."

The horseman circled about him, ever keeping his distance and a taut rope, stooped swiftly from the saddle, caught up the hat where it had fallen and sent it spinning to its owner.

"Having your hat, now you'll be ready to go? All right; straight down the road and I'll bring up the rear."

"I thought that I was to ride?"

"After the first couple of hundred yards. There's a horse waiting, just around a corner; tucked away out of sight in a thicket. Are you ready?"

Random made no reply but strode ahead as commanded, with his watchful captor following a few paces at his rear. Presently, when commanded to do so, he turned from the wheel-track into a little path, still holding his silence, and almost immediately came upon the promised horse. It was saddled but not bridled; its long tether rope was tied to a tree.

"Climb aboard," he was ordered. "I'll allow you enough slack to get up, but at the first sign of any monkey-business I'll have to jerk you down again—Never mind the rope; I'll untie it for you. And don't worry about having no bridle; you won't need any. Your horse will know the way, and besides I'll have the other end of the rope."

Still without protest and in a silence which began to

be of the irritating, not to say baffling, order, Random mounted. A moment later they were riding into the woods, the captive in the lead, the captor some few feet behind, holding the two ropes.

Had he spoken, Random would have said:

"It's one of two things; either I've fallen into the hands of a madman or he's just some crack-brained fool having his fun with a greenhorn, and in an hour he'll deliver me at Redwood Center."

But he did not speak. They went along at a trot, following the narrow path among the trees; down into the canyon; into the dim trail on the other side; and, breaking into a gallop, pressed steadily deeper into the solitudes. Ever more rugged and impressive grew the wilderness about them; never once did they see a lamp-lighted window or hear the bark of a dog. In less than an hour they slackened speed before a long, low, log cabin at the edge of a wood. Since there were no lights within, the cabin itself was seen only when they reined in close to its sturdy walls.

Here they dismounted. Random, offering no objections as he was ordered about, unsaddled and turned both horses loose; he it was who, with the rope still tight about his arms, led the way to the door.

"Enter, mine honored guest," chuckled the good-natured voice behind him. "A pressure of the knee does it; door left ajar most hospitably. In we go."

In they went. The door closed behind the second man to enter. A match scratched; the little spurt of flame found a convenient lamp-wick; a large, comfortable room sprang out of the dark. The unwilling guest looked about him with keen interest; here he might come upon his first clue to explain the night's

adventure. A closed door through which he had come; another closed door in a far corner. A big, rock fireplace that would have swallowed a six-foot log and asked for more. A few chairs, crude yet comfortable; a table, home-made yet striking a pleasant note against wide plank flooring and rough-hewn beams overhead; a couch with coverlet and cushions which spoke insistently of femininity. Silken, flowered things, hand-embroidered. Done for this fool of a highwayman—or stolen by him? He had used them with scant respect; the cushions were crumpled and had been thumped into the desired shapes; careless boots had smudged the coverlet.

No, despite the feminine touch, the place was a man's place. A rifle was supported by wooden pegs over the fireplace; a smaller rifle stood in a corner; a shotgun lay across a chair; a pair of old boots leaned in the inimitably drunken style of old boots against a wall; across the beams overhead were a half dozen fishing-rods, while hanging from pegs everywhere were old coats, boxing-gloves, leather straps, bridle-bits.

From the room itself and with far keener curiosity, the captive turned to look at his captor. But even in the lamplight he could make little enough of him. For the big handkerchief hid all of his face below his eyes, and the big black hat, its brim pulled down, threw the eyes into shadow. A tall, rangy looking fellow in high boots and soft gray shirt; a young fellow, to judge by his springy carriage and trim muscular build. But whether villain or madman, how fathom with eyes and mouth hidden?

Again it became natural to concentrate upon tone and quality of the man's voice. A voice cool and pleasant,

quiet, friendly—happy-go-lucky?—always good humored.

"Take a chair; make yourself at home. A chair yonder, across the room. Now we let go the rope. You'll notice I tote a gun? And you'll take my word for it that I can drive a nail as far as I can see the head of it?" He sat on the edge of his table, a spurred boot swinging idly. Like the guest he had brought home with him, his own eyes were busied making what he could of the other.

"You're the devil of a looking poet," he admitted, and one knew that his handkerchief hid a broad grin. "First I ever saw, though. I'd expected to find you lean and lanky; scraggly, you know, with long hair and thin nose and specs."

Instead he looked on an exceedingly well set-up, blond, blue eyed and, generally speaking, keen-looking young athlete. The look in those wide-spaced blue eyes was the look of a man who, under most circumstances, would know how to render a very fair account of himself.

"Going around making speeches to women's clubs," meditated the man seated on the table. He began making a cigarette. Having lighted it, with the first puff of smoke he expelled the words: "Well, you don't look it."

Random had thrown his rope off and dropped down into the chair offered him.

"You've the advantage of me, with that rag over your face," he retorted. From a neat monogrammed case he took a cigarette; when both were smoking he asked abruptly: "Who in blazes are you, anyway? And what do you want with me?"

"Who am I?" He laughed softly. "That's a great one; ask the man who sticks you up to introduce himself! Well, if you insist, why not?" He appeared to reflect; even thrust his hat far back for a moment to rumple a head of short, crisp black hair; the eyes, revealed fleetingly before he thought to jerk his hat low again, were black and bold and keen. He laughed again. "A name, huh? Well, let's see. Suppose you call me Bonbright. Bonbright Ord. Or just Bon Ord, for short. Or just Bon. How's that strike you?"

"It strikes me that, under the circumstances, you'll no doubt give me any name but your own. But never mind, Mr.—Ord. You were going on to tell me what you want of me?"

"Exactly." Bonbright Ord—if that were his name—gave his cigarette a quick little flip to free it of the gathering ash, and said gravely: "What you're to do—to go free and unharmed, you know—is to make me a song!"

"Ah! I see. Quite natural, I'm sure."
And to himself:

"Mad. Mad as a hatter."

CHAPTER II

THE one who styled himself Bonbright Ord—"just Bon Ord, for short"—nodded and, no doubt, grinned broadly.

"There you'll find all the makings," he offered, waving his cigarette. "On the shelf there. Full bottle of the best fountain-pen ink, jet black; tablet fresh from the drug store; and a brand new pen."

"All the makings! Of course," said Random, eyeing him sharply. Then his eyes roved away to the shelf. Thus, while he noted those materials which lent themselves toward the making of a bit of poesy, he marked also a sturdier and altogether more businesslike-looking bottle. "That fellow, now," he added, "ought to have something in him stouter than ink?"

"Thirsty? Well, you've got the right to be. Help yourself. Out of the bottle, or you'll see a tin cup behind it."

Having permission to do so, his guest stepped across the room and took down the quart bottle. If it came to another scrimmage here was a good, handy weapon; he had that in mind as well as other matters. He drew the cork to sniff the contents, saying as men have come to say of late, up and down through the States:

"Know the man that made it, I suppose?"

"Take a whiff. The real article there, old timer. Haig and Haig, and but recently arrived from your own fair Canada."

"Indeed? Between whiles, with no highwayman—job pressing, you turn your hand to smuggling liquor over the border, I gather?"

"You'll hear it said, friend, that there's no evil under the sun that I haven't dabbled in!— Drink hearty."

Random did and then returned to his chair.

"You heard something of the wreck, no doubt?"

"All about it; spread rails, smashed engine, and general mess-up with no lives lost, it would seem that the loss to Seattle was the greatest; since, Sir Poet, you were so delayed as to have to cancel your lecture there. And that way the Ladies' Suffering Society of Redwood Center stood to play in luck, inviting you over, paying all expenses and a hundred dollars to boot—and incidentally having the chance of a lifetime to crow over the Suffering Ladies of Indian Rock."

"You are well informed. Even to the hundred dollars; and that, my dear sir, is quite a snug little fortune these days. Twenty pounds and some odd shillings and pence. Well, well— Only, concerning the imputed rivalry between the good ladies of Redwood Center and those of Indian Rock, I am afraid I am quite ignorant. But to return to the wreck: Were you informed that the accident happened before dinner was served and that——"

"Hungry, too?" He slipped down from the table, locked the door by which they had entered, dropped the key into his pocket and went out through the other door, leaving it open. His prisoner watched him shrewdly and, when he had passed from sight, stepped softly to the shelf from which he had taken the bottle. For, on a shelf above, he had glimpsed the butt of a heavy revolver protruding from a litter of untidy odds

and ends. Silently he possessed himself of the weapon, looking to make sure that it was loaded——

From the adjoining room came a thundering report and the spit of fire; the revolver in Random's grasp flew out of his hands, leaving him standing startled, and shaking his tingling fingers. He went back to his chair without a word and a moment later his host came in, both hands full.

"There you are," said Bon Ord cheerily. "The best the house affords. Pull up, Sir Poet, and set to. Have another nip of Scotch to whet the appetite, because I warn you it's home cooking. Know the man that did it," he concluded with his humorous chuckle.

Random obeyed.

"If your cookery is as good as your liquor, Mr. Ord," he said, touching his lips with his handkerchief, "I proclaim you the very king of hosts. You'll not join me?"

"Your health," said Bon Ord.

"But no solid nourishment? Ah." He began plying knife and fork after the English fashion and the other watched him interestedly. "By the way, I think that you said earlier in our conversation that you could drive a nail with a pistol ball? I wonder if you ever tried, say at a hundred paces, splitting a bullet against a knife blade?"

Bon Ord chuckled again, in rare appreciation this time. Under his breath he said something about "a man like him making speeches to afternoon dames!"

Random heard him and, staring at him coolly, grunted:

"Try it on some time, old top, if you think it's so dead easy! But look here; I wish to thunder you'd

take that rag off your face. I'm afraid you'll smother and I'll be accused of doing you in."

"Nothing doing, British cousin. Think I want to do time for this song you're tuning up to write me?"

"So you do have jails in this wilderness of yours? That's good. Most excellent biscuits, Mr. Ord."

He finished a hearty meal, mixed himself a tumbler of Scotch and water and sought his cigarette case.

"Now to business," he said with the first slow puff of smoke. "There's that song, now. With all the 'makings' at hand, why delay? I've been invited to drop into verse, like Mr. Wegg; and I should be no less obliging, I'm sure. Let us see; what kind of a song now?"

"A song to sing——"

"To a girl, of course? Under her window. Exactly——"

"Not so, old-timer. No girl ever yet trailed her shadow across the fair life of Bon Ord. A song——"

"Not of the hymn-book order, I'll be bound. No funereal chant, eh, what? A marching song, a riding song—a song for the hearthside where bold smugglers gather! In a word—a song of cheer? Am I right?"

He went for pen, ink and paper and sat down soberly.

"When this is done," he said, looking up and still, for the life of him, entirely at sea as to this man's sanity, "I'm to be sped on my way?"

"Hm," said Bon Ord. "Depends, let's say, on you; that is, on how fast you work."

"If I finish the job—say, in ten minutes?"

"That would be in the rough draft, of course; you'd want to polish it up a bit." He glanced at an old alarm clock ticking away in a corner; a quarter to nine.

"You'd want to put in about three hours doing the polishing act, I'd think," he concluded genially.

"In other words, you want to keep me here until along toward midnight? Then, there's something else, something beside the song, you have in mind? You had another reason for putting your rope over me to-night?"

"Did I?" More than ever Random wanted to see the face behind the mask; the voice sounded grave enough but he felt somewhat instinctively that there was little gravity in the shadow-hidden eyes or upon the lips behind the handkerchief. "Well, yes, since you ask me, I did. You see," he blurted out, leaning forward and affecting in his tone a certain candid confession, "I was given the opportunity which a thoughtful and loving son must snatch at, to do a kind deed for—my mother!"

Random gasped.

"You'd hardly expect me to believe," he said testily, "that any woman on earth had any concern in this outrage to-night? That you've manhandled me and threatened me with a gun, to please your mother?"

"My mother," said Bon Ord sentimentally, "is a very sweet and very self-sacrificing Christian lady. She mothers the entire world; all poor sinners find in her one to give them the right steer back into the fold. All the down-trodden are her children; all uplift movements are her special pets. She is one, Mr. Poet, who is always heading committees and filling the chair of the presiding lady. I might say, she is the chief shining light of the fair village of Indian Rock."

"She has, in her son," murmured Random, "one to fill her with pride."

"I am glad to hear you say that, old-timer," sighed Bon Ord modestly. "And now you will understand everything when I ask you: Could such a son stand idly by while the rival ladies of Redwood Center advertised to the world that they, and not their sisters of Indian Rock, had entertained and had listened to the renowned poet? To a gentleman, the very first ever to set foot in these mountains, with a real honest-to-gosh handle to his name?"

"In short, to save your good mother the sorrow of knowing that the other town had captured a gentleman with a handle to his name, you are arranging that I come too late to Redwood Center to make my talk?"

"How you worm the truth out of me!" confessed Bon Ord.

Random grunted.

"If I could do that, I'd have the real reason for this cursed high-hand nonsense of yours to-night. Silly ass. As if such reasons as those you give explained anything. What is back of all that?"

Bon Ord appeared most innocently surprised.

"I've tipped you my hand, giving you two such weighty incentives——"

"What's the other one?" snapped Random. "The real one?"

Bon Ord whispered mysteriously:

"There's a girl in it!"

"And a moment ago you told me that no girl——"

"I said that no girl ever trailed her shadow across the fair life of Bon Ord. True, too. This girl, you see, doesn't cast any shadow. She just radiates sunshine."

This time Random fairly snorted. Then he had a

tip of his drink; then a glance at the clock; then his eyes rested on the "makings."

"Better have a good drink first," suggested his host. "I've always heard that inspiration came easier that way."

"Your health, Mr. Ord." The pen began to scratch; Random found himself scribbling a limerick. It was a relief to his feelings; it was devoted to a certain individual styling himself Bonbright Ord—and it had a sting in its tail. He counted it as good as a slap in the face and thrust it across the table to be read.

Bon Ord slapped his leg and laughed. Random lifted his brows at him.

"You'd laugh at anything, wouldn't you?" he demanded.

"I'd try."

Random leaned closer.

"Would you resent it, Mr. Ord, if I called you an infernal scoundrel?"

"Not in the least," said Bon Ord cheerfully.

"Or a cheap sport? Or a sneak and a coward?"

"Help yourself, old-timer. Another drink? You'll find it helps the flow of words."

"Is there a single word in the dictionary—or out of it—that you would object to being applied to you?"

"Hm. There might be one or two. What's the idea?"

"Consider the word spoken," said Random coolly, drumming the while on the table top.

Again Bon Ord laughed, but, laughing, slipped from his place on the table. Random, as quick as a flash, was on his feet.

"I see you have gloves here. I'd suggest——"

"Any way you like. You've got it coming to you, I guess. And it might help pass the time away. Only you won't forget my song?"

A flicker of satisfaction showed in the keen blue eyes. It was Random's thought that his captor, in such a flash of anger as spurts out now and then when two men fall to blows, might be tempted to use the weapon at his hip; a gloved hand would not come by it readily.

Thoroughly businesslike they cleared the room, shoving table and chairs back against the walls. Before drawing on his gloves Bon Ord stepped to the kitchen, unbuckled his belt and hung holster and weapon over a chair. He closed the door and came back without making any reference to this act. Random nodded in appreciation.

"Better take the rag off your face," he suggested. "You'll need both eyes."

"Fancy yourself with the mitts, don't you? Well, so do I. Ready?"

Random nodded and Bon Ord, as swift as light, struck at the unprotected face. Had that blow landed, the affair would have been over. But, rather oddly, the face was not there at all; for an instant it appeared even to vanish. Instead, he encountered a gloved fist which took him square in the chin—and Bon Ord measured a good six feet and an inch or so more upon his own plank floor.

He sat up dizzily.

"You son of a gun," he muttered. "You're the devil of a poet, you are!"

"Really, old top, I'm disappointed in you."

"Needn't be," grunted Bon Ord and got to his feet.

"Mask's gone," Random reminded him.

So it was. The big black hat also. Confronting the much interested Englishman stood a clean-cut young fellow with snapping black eyes, a skin as dark and bronzed as an Indian's, with strong white teeth and a generous, humorous mouth.

"Come ahead," grinned Bon Ord. "Try it again. Didn't think you had it in you."

They sparred a moment, stepping lightly in and out, with a tap here and a feint there, each extremely busy gauging his man. They looked to be a fair match, the American two or three inches taller, the Englishman more compact, looking the more muscular and certainly as quick of hand and foot and eye.

"I've worked out a couple of lines," said Random. "Something like this :

" 'Oh, I'm rollicksome, frolicsome, devil-may-care,
With joy in my heart and vine leaves in my hair—' "

Like the idea?"

"Fine!" Tap. "Go ahead with it." Tap.

He seemed carelessly leaving an opening for another blow, like the one he had received. Random leaped in, delivered the blow, merely grazed a tanned cheek, and in return received a jolt like a mule's kick and was knocked down as flat as Bon Ord had been before him, which is to say as flat as any pancake. Bon Ord burst into joyous laughter.

"Oh, I'm rollicksome, frolicsome, devil-may-care,"
he chanted.

"With joy in my heart and vine leaves in my hair!"

Random rose, shook himself, made a face as though to assure himself that the muscles were still working, and then suggested affably:

"We're apt to have a real party here before this is over, old top."

"How about the rest of my song?" queried Bon Ord, having swung at him and danced back. "Work best on your feet, do you?"

"The spirit of Cyrano is with me," retorted Random, his own grin suddenly as broad as the other's. Obviously, for the first time since the evening's adventure had opened upon him he was having a thoroughly enjoyable time. "I'll give you two more lines and then I'll knock you cold."

"I'm the foam on the beaker, I'm the glint on the sword;
The young sun at glad morning—I'm bonny Bon Ord!"

Bon Ord plainly meant to take time to clap his hands, but no such time was allowed him. Like a whirlwind his opponent was upon him, rushing him hard, beating through his guard, punishing him with two or three body blows, the two men grunting with the deliverance of each of them. But like another whirlwind the on-rush was met; neither man meant to give back now unless he had no alternative. Already they breathed heavily; Bon Ord's lower lip was swelling rapidly, while one of Random's eyes was slowly closing, giving his formerly open countenance the effect of a sinister leer. They milled around, up and down through the long room, giving and taking, giving and taking again. Within five minutes of donning the gloves both men had gone down twice. And once both were on

the floor together. It was when one, driving his leather-covered fist into the other's face—it was Bon Ord striking this time—lost his balance, twisted his ankle as a high boot heel slipped, and the two went down with one tremendous crash.

It was at this moment that some one burst in at a door at the rear of the log house and came racing through the kitchen. They heard nothing of the flying footsteps, being occupied with other sounds and thoughts. The door leading to the kitchen was flung open and a girl in riding togs flashed upon their shaken consciousnesses.

"Bon!" she cried out. "You, Bon Ord!"

And there she broke short off and gasped at what she saw. From the look of horror dawning on her face it was to be supposed that her first thought at the sight of the two men on the floor was that she had arrived just in time to see murder being done. But a second glance having explained the true state of affairs, she stamped her foot and exclaimed with considerable vigor:

"Bon Ord, you big fool!"

Bon Ord laughed and got to his feet. The other man was standing now, his handkerchief awkwardly held in a gloved hand wiping his lips.

"The bandit's sister, without the shadow of a doubt," mused Random. "One knows by the tone employed. The one perhaps who casts no shadow, but just sheds sunshine!"

For a sunnier girl, though just now presenting herself in something of a pretty April storm, he had never seen. She had arrived, no doubt, on horseback, riding hard; her cheeks were like roses from the sting of the

rushing air, her eyes shining. Fair where Bon Ord was dark, she was like him in brimming eagerness.

"This is a crack-brained thing for even you to do, Bon Ord," she said with a rush. "Little Joe Cole couldn't go fast enough to get started telling the tale of it. They're after you; they'll be here in two minutes. Dad is——"

"Little Sister Ann to the rescue!" grinned Bon Ord.

"Don't be stupid!" she cried hotly. "I tell you they'll be here any minute now. If I hadn't chanced to be the first to hear that crazy Joe Cole's spluttering——"

"Told a good one, I'll bet," her brother chuckled. "What did he have to say, Sis?"

"Oh!—A terrible fellow threatening to rip him open—getting the wrong man in the dark—his companions hid in the shadows, a dozen of them or so, all with guns levelled—You know. But, Bon——"

Random, while all ears and eyes for the girl, managed somewhere in the back of his head to meditate swiftly on the fact that his highwayman had not lied about his name. "A big fool," his sister had named him in that utter frankness which is found only in the bosom of families. To kidnap a man and rough handle him—and then, on request, to give his name!

"Oh, you make me want to *scream*!" exclaimed the girl.

Bon Ord sighed and tried to look contrite and said sadly:

"Here again, I fear, my soft heart has led me astray! To save our dear mother from humiliation and mockery—to give my little sister her first chance to look upon a real live nobleman—most girls would be crazy to see a Sir Charles Random——"

He stopped there and, while his sister's face reddened, his grin came back. Before she could find a word to say, he hastened on, crying out:

"And I haven't even remembered to present you! Miss Ord, here is none other than the poet—a real poet, as he has demonstrated to me—Sir Charles Random, who——"

Sir Charles bowed. Urged to step forward and offer his hand, he made the first step, remembered his glove, and bowed again. At that moment they heard the rush of hoofs storming up to the door. Bon Ord snatched up his hat.

"I'm on my way, dear people," he said swiftly. "As they come in the front door, I'm out the back. Tell mother I'll drop her a note—from Mexico, probably.—You say dad is with the bunch?"

"Yes. And he's mad clean through this time——"

"I leave you two alone," said Bon Ord, "but the conventions will not long be offended since you'll have company in two shakes."

He waved his hat and ran to the kitchen door. They heard his humming:

"I'm the foam on the beaker, I'm the glint on the sword;
The young sun at glad morning—I'm bonny Bon Ord!"

"He's too late," gasped Ann, a look of fear surging up into her eyes. "Listen!"

There came a thunder of blows at the front door. But there were other sounds, more sinister in her ears; a great noise at the rear of the house. Almost immediately a crowd of men, six or eight of them, came stamping into the room from the kitchen, Bon Ord in

their midst and most securely gripped by arm and shoulder. One of the men hastened to open the front door, finding the key in Bon Ord's pocket. Several more men came in.

At their fore was a tall, bronzed giant of a man who, from grizzled hair and mustache, might have been fifty and who, when you marked but his eyes or carriage, appeared much younger. Booted and spurred, his wide black hat thrust back, he looked immensely like the young prisoner on whom his eyes rested implacably. He wore over his soft gray shirt no coat but a vest only. And pinned to the vest was a sheriff's star. After his eyes it was his star that caught and held Random's fascinated gaze.

Pressing in behind Sheriff Ord was little old Joe Cole, weazened, garrulous, excited.

"They was going to kill me—to rip me open and mutilate me and carve me up general——"

"Shut up, Joe," said the sheriff calmly. "You can do your gabbing later on. You, Bon, will come along with me. You're going to jail for this, and for as long as I can put you over."

He turned to the Englishman.

"You're the gent that got handled rough, are you? The poet?" he said, not seeming to stress the word yet managing, it struck Random, to put the slightest sneer into it. "I'll ask you to come along."

All eyes were on Random. His own eyes, having trafficked with the sheriff's, then with Bon Ord's, ignored all others to come the directest way to a meeting with Ann Ord's. Then he began speaking.

"I am so glad you came, you gentlemen. It has been, you will understand, a rather busy evening for us."

Bon Ord looked at him wonderingly. To him Random had never appeared so slow and deliberate as now. He spoke drawlingly; he drawled more and more as he went on. He had singled out Joe Cole now and went on:

"You told them, Mr. Cole, how we were beset by a dozen men? Or were there more? And how, dashing off to secure help, you were forced to leave me in the villains' clutches?"

"Tell 'em?" cried Joe Cole. "Haven't I been telling——"

"Exactly. But of course you could not know the sequel. How this young man, Mr. Bon Ord, alone—ah, single-handed, so to speak—came upon them like a—ah—a roaring lion! Mr. Ord—Sheriff Ord, I think I should say?—may I congratulate you upon the courage and prowess of your son?"

Ann Ord gasped audibly. Never were eyes brighter than those she turned upon this unexpected deliverer.

Sheriff Ord turned on him another sort of eyes with quite another sort of look in them. Eyes like diamond drills.

"So that's your story?" he demanded roughly. "Mean to stick by that version of the affair?"

"Oh—ah—certainly," smiled Random. "Oh, certainly."

"Come ahead, boys, we'll be going," said the sheriff in that same calm, quiet voice. And over his shoulder, he added: "Better be off home to your mother, Ann. I don't think this is the sort of company I'd care to have you in."

The others, though with obvious reluctance, filed out. No one gave them an invitation to stay. Little Joe

Cole, the last to go, was laughingly thrust out by Bon Ord himself. A second time he locked the door.

"Now," he declared, beaming upon his two guests, "we three can be cozy together for a bit. You see, Ann, I really want you to know this gentleman. He's a friend of mine!"

"Bon Ord—" she began. But he interrupted genially.

"He's been making me a song, Ann. Not so bad, either, considering that he'd had a couple of drinks on an empty stomach and I was battering him while he was trying to think of rhymes. You'll help me to try to get a good tune for it——"

"I think—" said Ann.

"Then there's this," he continued. "He was to make a speech at Redwood Center to-night and get a hundred bones for it; think of that! We've made him late for his appointment——"

"We!"

"And from a chance remark, I fancy," and he turned questioningly to Random, "that he could use a few dollars nicely?"

Random could grin as frankly as his host. He turned out a pocket.

"Stony," he confessed. "Mr. Bon Ord, being in a way responsible for me, will have to board and lodge me at least over night and morning, I fear."

"And so," Bon Ord told his sister, "we'll have to convene with mother. She'll have him at the house; she'll arrange to have him make his little speech to the ladies of Indian Rock instead of Redwood. And she'll make the other ladies ashamed of themselves when they learn that it's two hundred instead of one hundred to listen to this child of inspiration."

Her eyes were set sparkling; she began to laugh before he had done.

"Old top," said Random, turning to Bon Ord, "may we have the bottle out again? I'd like to drink a toast with you—to that girl you were telling me about?"

Ann looked—and was—keenly interested.

"To the girl," said Random, lifting his glass, "who casts no shadow on any man's life—the girl who radiates sunshine——"

Ann, pretending to wonder whom they were talking of, blushed very charmingly.

CHAPTER III

No man stands higher in his own country than the Western sheriff. He represents law and order as is his sworn duty. But beyond that and above it, he is the champion of square-dealing. Otherwise he would seldom be elected to his office and would never continue, term after term, to be re-elected as very frequently he is. In the pursuit of his duties it is inevitable that he should make enemies; being a fair, just man he makes even more friends. He has friends even among the lawbreakers. It is an open game; he stands forth unhidden; he'll take them in if he can—rather, when he can. That's all right; it's a part of the game and was understood when they called for cards.

He is a big man physically, the Western sheriff, and a handsome man. There are and have been exceptions, crooked sheriffs and diminutive sheriffs; merely exceptions and few of them. In a crowd a stranger can point him out when he enters. He is a type and the particular requirements of his office seek the same type over and over through the years. Fearless he must be, or swift ridicule extinguishes and exterminates him; his own master, despite factions, and his own temper's dictator; commanding. And finally, gentle. So many of the weak, the unfortunate, the young, feel at one time and another his hand laid upon a bowed head or trembling shoulder. Admonition: Prepare yourself to fill the boots of one of these men and—you'll be a man, my son.

Sheriff Ord, before becoming the knight of the silver

tar, was one of the big ranchers of his community. Now, after eighteen years in office, a rancher he remained. He took a vast, comfortable pride in his broad acres; being an Ord he loved the land itself, having his roots in the soil, after a fashion which neither city-dwellers nor merely commercial agriculturists could understand. Most men will sell their ranches, if one but bids high enough. Not Sheriff Ord. A man doesn't sell his mother or his wife and children or his fair name; why, then, sell his home? One could, for money, have sooner persuaded him to barter his right arm than the "Old Ord place."

He rode each day, circumstance permitting, the three miles from the courthouse in Indian Rock to his home. At the top of a certain hill his horse invariably pricked forward its ears; from here they caught the first glimpse of the rambling old house among its apple-trees and lawns; from here, though they may have loitered thus far, they come on at a good round gallop. No matter what the day has been, the man's eyes brighten now.

"It's a pretty good old world, after all, Rambler," he says cheerily. And, generally: "Here come the dogs; they've spotted us."

Seldom it was that the Ord dogs, a pack of half a dozen or more, failed to sight the master at this distance and to come charging across the fields to escort him home; Bayard, the big hound, leading them; Topples, the little black, long-eared terrier, far behind. They were sure of a friendly greeting, a pat on the head when the sheriff dismounted at the stables.

On a bench under the old apple-tree before the house—it was a sturdy, knarled old fellow with com-

fortable low branches of the sort to invite to a cozy summer seat under the cool, leafy canopy, and occupied the place of honor at the middle of the front lawn—sat the sheriff's daughter Ann; close by, looking down at her, stood her mother's most highly honored guest. They had been for a long ride and were but just now returned.

"Dad's coming," said Ann, out of a silence.

"Yes. I saw the dogs.—I've had a wonderful time here, Miss Ann."

She laughed.

"You speak as though you were about to take wings and fly away for good and all."

He laughed with her, a bit ruefully it struck her and she looked up swiftly. Then he began jingling the loose coins in his pocket.

"These are the wings I've sprouted," he returned lightly. "Two lectures in two nights, with your mother sponsoring me, and, behold, I'm rich again!" He was silent a moment, listening to the oncoming hoof-beats. "Enough to buy a ticket to—somewhere else——"

"Oh—Mother will be dreadfully disappointed. She wanted you to talk to at least two more clubs——"

"I am forced to note, and rather tardily, I admit," he went on, gravely now, "that your father, though always most courteous and outwardly hospitable, will be glad to see the last of me. Had I not been concerned too exclusively with—other matters, I should have marked at the very beginning that he doesn't like me and, what's more, doesn't want to like me. Therefore, this having dawned on me at this terribly late hour, I'm ashamed that I was so dense."

Obviously she hesitated before speaking. Then she asked swiftly:

"Why shouldn't dad like you?"

"Or, shall we say, why should he?"

The sheriff, seeing them, waved, called cheerily, and rode on to the stable. Having had a word or two with Morny, the Indian stable hand, and still surrounded by the dogs, he came to the two under the apple-tree. His greeting seemed merely carelessly cordial yet even Ann, watching him shrewdly, knew that the Englishman was right: Sheriff Ord would be the last man on earth to urge him to linger.

"I saw Bon a minute in town to-day," he said before he went on to the house. "Said to tell you folks he wouldn't be able to get around to-night. Said he had something else on."

"Where's he going?" asked Ann quickly.

The sheriff shrugged his shoulders; Random noted how he carried the left shoulder a bit higher, a bit more advanced than its fellow and wondered if this slight oddity bore any reference to the heavy, old-fashioned revolver at his hip. Ord's pose always struck him as that of a man ready at any instant to "go for his gun."

"Who should know what Bon is up to?" laughed Ord, and went on.

Mrs. Ord met him on the wide veranda, looking cool and fresh in her summery dress—a brand new and very becoming dress, too, he was quick to note.

"Sir Charles just got back from a long, hot ride," were her words of greeting. "I'm having tea for him in a minute, Johnny. Better tidy up a bit and——"

"Tea?" he repeated after her. "H'm. Not taking anything, thanks, Mary."

"But you'll have something with us, Johnny! Just to be with us, you know; a cup of coffee, dear? I wish you would." She dropped her voice. "Sir Charles notices, I think— He is a very keen young man, Johnny!"

"Keen?" He regarded her thoughtfully. "Yes. Keen; that's right."

"What do you mean?" she queried sharply.

He laughed jovially and went on into the house.

"I mean that you are a most astute little woman," he chuckled, "and that, always concurring, I have but to echo your word!— By the way, Bon said to tell you that he wouldn't be able to come out to-night."

But already she was saying: "Sir Charles——"

At the Ord home for these three days it had been Sir Charles this and Sir Charles that and Sir Charles something else. Mrs. Ord, to speak vulgarly, was having the time of her life. The ladies of Redwood Center were left fairly sizzling in their own envy. She was most gracious to them; she had invited a few of the élite to call yesterday, allowing them a glimpse of Sir Charles, hardly more. She, as president of the ladies' club of Indian Rock, had introduced him for his little lecture. And, secretly amazed at her own brilliant good fortune, she had borne him back as her guest to the old Ord home. She hardly slept a wink. Oh, if Ann only would—oh, if Ann only could—oh, if Ann only should! For whole days she had floated in a sea of rapture; Ann said like a nice cool iceberg that has drifted into genial tropic sunshine and, though thawing despite itself, keeps a firm check upon its new impulses, assuring itself that to the last it must remain cool and a bit haughty, serene and very proper and very, very genteel.

"It's just like Bon," Ann was saying. "To disappoint us when he knows we'd counted on him."

"I'm sorry he isn't coming. You see, I wanted a good talk with him. Maybe he's going to help me set my future in order," he concluded with a curious sort of smile.

"Bon Ord help anybody with getting anything in order?" she exclaimed. "Most of all helping with *your* future?— I wish you'd always give a sign when you're about to start on one of your English jokes."

"You know I'm serious. You make out that I've no worry about a future; that I'm just to go on trotting around and gabbing at so much a gab! Silly game, that. Besides, I'm no good at lecturing; not much good at anything, certainly not at writing poetry. But what in blazes was I to do?" he demanded defensively. "I was most deucedly out of funds; they told me I could make a good thing at this lecture-tour business." He jingled his newly gotten wealth a moment thoughtfully; then his face cleared and he announced warmly: "I'm done with it. I'm going to ask your brother Bon to give me a job on his ranch."

Ann fairly gasped. Then she laughed at him so that the tears stood in her eyes. And then, beginning to fancy him really serious, she too in turn grew grave.

They fell to talking about Bon, of whom, of late, they had already spoken a great deal. Oh, Bon was all right; Ann always admitted that, even after she had roundly scolded him and he, inevitably set grinning broadly, acknowledged: "Yep, you're right, Sister Ann. Sure you are. I'll have to do the way you say." Yes, Bon was all right—in his heart. And, speaking otherwise, it must be confessed that he was pretty much all wrong.

"He just wants to play, you know," said Ann. "He wants to think of life just as a game——"

"Well, perhaps it is. Maybe Bon is wise."

"It's only that he refuses to be serious. Anything goes with Bon if there's only fun in it. What he calls fun. He doesn't count costs; he won't. He always says that the night before was worth the headache next day."

"He's got a fresh outlook on life," smiled Random. "But then he's young, remember."

"Do you know how old Bon is?"

"Twenty? A couple of years over, perhaps."

"A couple of years under—thirty," she retorted. "No, Bon can't plead any juvenile excuses any longer."

Random whistled. He had judged Bon Ord his junior by fully a half dozen years, and here found them to be almost of an age. No; he couldn't excuse his actions as Random had just thought to do for him.

"He'll get sense, if he lives long enough, some day—maybe," said Ann. "I don't know. There's nothing too crazy for him to go headlong into. As you've seen."

Yes; he had seen. And he had seen a good deal of Bon Ord since and had found him no end likeable. Well, the entire family was that; the sheriff, though he did not offer his hand; Mrs. Ord, though she did make him at times uncomfortable with her airs and her eternal "Sir Charles"; Ann, certainly.

"I think you have an idea what he is up to to-night?" he said abruptly.

"He's with that hideous gang of his," said Ann quite positively.

He knew of the men whom she always designated as

the "gang," usually with a healthy adjective before it. The men themselves he did not know; they were hardly the type to come to the lectures which Mrs. Ord had arranged. There was a man named Hyde, nicknamed Leather Hide, who, Random gathered, was what is technically known as a bootlegger. There was another named Ralph Vickers whom Ann termed Leather Hide's chief villain. There were others of their kind, upon every man of whom the sheriff had his official eye and more than one of whom could have described for you and in detail the inside of the county jail. Bootleggers only? A good deal more and worse, Ann understood; though just what she had to leave to her very lively imagination. Riffraff, to begin with; unprincipled scoundrels to the end—and Bon Ord made them his playmates.

"Good folks," Bon had his cheerful way of saying, "are so darn uninspiring! Old Leather Hide's outfit may be roughnecks—but they're not so bad at that. Pretty good sports, come right down to it."

"A card game on to-night, maybe?" suggested Random.

"Let's hope that's as bad as it is," laughed Ann. For there was a great deal of Bon's lightness of touch about her; and if she found herself getting long-faced—she seldom did, except over Bon—she was quick to light-about-face.

"Their—ah—hangout," said Random, "is farther back in the mountains, beyond Bon's place?" And, when she nodded and looked to him to go on with it: "Would Bon throw me out, do you think?" for the third time reminding her of his wealth with a silvery tinkle of his pocket money.

"You don't mean to say that *you* would play with them? Why, as Bon would put it, they'd pick your bones nice and clean. They'd rob you down to your last penny."

"I've a notion that you think I've been raised wrapped up in cotton batting all my life——"

"I don't think that you've had much experience running with card sharps and crooks," she returned coolly. "Ask dad; he'd tell you that you were either a fool or a pretty nervy man even to go poking into that crowd at night with two or three hundred dollars in your pockets."

Up went his eyebrows; he regarded her critically.

"You suggest that these merry gentlemen wouldn't hesitate to—ah—assassinate me to come by my new glittering riches? You're pulling my leg now, Miss Ann."

"Meaning?" prompted Ann quizzically.

"You're spoofing; joshing, you know."

"Am I? Ask dad."

"Perhaps I may."

Tea was announced. Mrs. Ord did the pouring—and the talking. The sheriff did not appear. Presently Random excused himself and strolled down the long hall to tap at the door of the sheriff's study. At the prompt and hearty, "Come ahead," he went in.

"No, thanks," he said as the sheriff nodded to a chair. "I'll not trouble you a minute. I merely stepped in to apologize."

Half smiling, looking up at him frankly, Ord chuckled:

"That oughtn't to take long! Apologizing for just what?"

"For having been rather dense, sir. For failing to note that my going would be a good deal more desirable to you than my lingering on. You see, I was, I am afraid, so greatly occupied with—with other considerations, that——"

Sheriff John Ord laughed.

"All right; I understand," he returned quite pleasantly. "Apology accepted. You're on your way, then?"

"Yes, immediately. I'm walking in to Indian Rock; I'll be sending out for my bags——"

"Nonsense. Let Ann drive you in. Or, if you like, take a horse and ride in. You're welcome to the horse as long as you like; I've plenty, you know. And, if there's anything I can do——"

"Thanks. A bit of advice, then? What would you say if I took what money I have, nearly three hundred dollars that have come my way since I arrived here, and asked to sit in at cards with some friends of Bon's; the fellows who, I hear, play some pretty stiff games back in the woods beyond Bon's place?"

Ord's eyes twinkled.

"If that bunch knew you had three hundred dollars in your jeans," he chuckled, "and if you showed up at their hang-out at night, they'd laugh themselves sick.—If you wanted to know how I'd feel, I'd be tickled all over. You'd run every possible chance of starting the movement for one less Englishman on earth—and I'm just sitting tight and waiting to get those jaspers with the goods on."

"You don't mean that Bon——"

"Of course I don't! Bon's no cut-throat; he's just a chuckle-headed idiot. But if you think old Leather

Hide or Dick Delamere or Flash Vickers wouldn't wolf you for half your wad, you're crazy."

"Thanks," said Random again. "I must thank you also, Mr. Ord, for the entertainment I have had here. And, good-by."

"So long," said Ord heartily. "And don't think of walking. By the way, if you feel that way about it, let Ann lend you one of her horses. She's got a likely string, all her own, you know."

And, ten minutes later, Random rode off in the first dusk of evening, turning in the saddle to wave again and again to Mrs. Ord and Ann on the veranda. Mrs. Ord had insisted that he must come again; it was such a privilege, such a delight to have him. Ann merely assured him that he was welcome to use Major as long as he liked; the young sorrel was growing "fat and sassy" with all too little exercise, and a bit of hard riding would do him good. The horse might be left with Bon, or at the stable in town—or returned at his convenience.

Random cut through the edge of the little mountain village, struck into a trail leading north and let Major out into a gallop for the log house where Bon Ord had entertained him three nights before. Tonight, as upon that other occasion, he arrived in the dark. This time, however, there was a lamp burning in the cabin; he could see the line of light under the door, a gleam through the board shutters hiding a window.

With a soft jingle of spurs he dismounted at the door. He knocked, fancied that he heard a grunt in answer, opened the door, and stuck his head in.

"Glad I found you in, Bon. I——"

It was the look on Bon Ord's face, first of all, that startled him. The strangest look he had ever seen on any man's face.

There stood Bon Ord in the middle of the floor, looking at him in that strange way.

"What's the matter?" asked Random, half in and half out of the door.

Then he saw. On the floor at Ben's feet a man lay stretched out. His head and shoulders but partly concealed a dark stain that had spread across the planks of the floor. Random experienced a queer, cold shiver—even before young Ord spoke.

"It's Dick Delamere," he said, all the while staring at Random in that baffling way. "He's dead."

Dropping Major's reins, Random stepped in softly and closed the door after him. He looked once again at the still figure on the floor turning its glazed eyes up to the dark beams above; then hastily turned away. He moistened his lips before he said, striving to speak calmly:

"You—killed—him?"

Bon Ord shrugged. He even summoned a short laugh to prefix his words but the laugh did not ring out true in Random's ears.

"Looks like it, doesn't it?" snapped Bon Ord.

CHAPTER IV

"BETTER tell me all about it, Bon," said Random.

Bon Ord merely stared at him. His brows were gathered, his eyes looking jet black and as hard as jet. Random, wishing to gather his wits, brought a blanket and spread it over the quiet form; a man could think better, clearer and swifter, with that hidden.

"One of Leather Hide's crowd, wasn't he?" he asked.

Bon Ord nodded. At last he stirred, going to the table to sit on the edge as he had done the other night while he made himself a cigarette.

"I'm going to ask you one thing," Random burst out. "You—you did it in a fair fight, didn't you?"

Bon Ord completed his little task of cigarette-making and dusted the fine crumbs of fallen tobacco from his knee before he replied.

"Take a good look at him," he suggested curtly. "He didn't even have a gun on him for once. What's more—he's shot behind the ear. Fair fight?" He grunted. "Never a chance!"

"But then, man—why, then, you didn't do it!"

"Who the hell said I did?" snapped Bon Ord.

"Then why on earth didn't you deny——"

"I haven't said I did it and I haven't said I didn't do it and I wish you'd shut up! I want to think."

"Think? Don't be an ass, Bon. It's time to do something. Don't you know this is a hanging matter

and that it's going to look pretty nasty for you? Or, if you're bound to do your thinking, let's have it aloud. We've got to do something, man."

Bon looked at him curiously.

"*We?*" he demanded.

"Yes, we. Now suppose you tell me all you know about it. You just came in and found him like that? Where had you been? Off alone in the woods or with somebody who can establish an alibi for you?"

Bon Ord did not even appear to be listening; he made no answer but sat very still, brooding heavily. But his strange inactivity, strange at least in him, was of the briefest. Of a sudden he sprang to his feet, strode across the room—Random noted that he made no detour for the fallen body but stepped straight across it—and snatched down the rifle from the pegs above the fireplace.

"Since you're bound to take a hand," he said curtly to Random, "you just streak back into Indian Rock as fast as the Lord'll let you. Get Doc Cuttle started out this way—*on the run!* Tell him what's what and that I said he was to bust himself wide open getting here——"

"But if the man is dead——"

"Then you drill on out to the old home. Get dad off to himself and spill the beans for him. Tell him there's no use in his looking for me to-night—or until I get good and ready to drop in on him."

He stepped swiftly to the door.

"But look here——" began Random.

Slam! That most emphatic of all answers, the banging shut of the door itself, cut him short and put an end to all questioning and expostulation. Bon Ord

was gone. Random heard him dash around the corner of the cabin and rush along on his way—wherever that might be.

“Bon!” he shouted into the dark after the already vanished man. “Bon! Hold on, there. This is no way for an innocent man to act. If you didn’t do it, come back!”

There came back to his straining ears a shrill whistle, the only answer from Bon Ord and one, he knew, not meant for him. A call, rather, to his horse that ever came running, like a dog, to his master. And this time not Nabob alone, since all the horses ran free, but four eager young animals broke from the fringe of the wood and with tossing manes, heads high, glossy hides making here and there a dusky sheen in the starlight, strove each one to be first. But Nabob, high favorite and jealous of that favoritism, snapped to right and left, threshed out with his heels and so won to the fore, his silken muzzle questing the coveted contact with the beloved master. Without tarrying for saddle or bridle, Bon Ord fairly hurled himself up to a seat on Nabob’s valiant back.

“Which way now, My Master? Don’t keep me waiting; only give me an inkling!” Such, Bon Ord knew, were the thoughts seething in Nabob’s brain, making his blood tingle, and swift answer was made in the firm touch upon the mane, the urgent pressure of a knee. Into the woods; deeper into the woods! Nabob responded, as quick as the arrow to the commanding string. Into the depths of the thick forest-lands—yet, just where then? Trails ran their tangled network in every direction; Nabob knew every foot of every trail. Just set him in the right one; just let him

be clear as to the exact destination—then sit back and watch him!

The other horses flung up their heels, shook their heads, and trotted along after him. Nabob, in a mere display of temper, snapped his teeth at the empty air. Now came the other tug at his mane, the other knee-pressure. So; that was it, was it? A good run down the long winding lane through the pines, across the pasture, down into the place where the willows grew in dense thickets; on through the thickets and, with a mighty splash, into the river itself! Ah, but who knew the way now better than Nabob! Across the river, over the hills, to swerve to the north, to pound along like the rush of a strong wind, to bear his master dodging under low branches, to take a monster fallen log at a flying leap, to win out into the open under the stars only to plunge again into the forest. Now let the despised young horses behind try to keep up with him!

It was a ride such as both man and horse loved. But to-night the man was strangely silent. Nabob excelled himself yet no gentle hand patted his laboring shoulder. They went down into the river like a bolt launched from the very king of catapults; Bon Ord was wet to the thighs and Nabob drenched to his very crest when they came out on the far side. Scattering drops of water, growing dry with the rush of air about them, they clattered on.

Ahead was a forking in the trail; Nabob, familiar with similar excursions, would surely have turned into the right branch had it not been that, well before they came to the turn, hand and knee warned him that they took the left hand trail. That meant, then, that they

did not head for the lonely cabin far up the river, but to an old house of rocks and logs where they had been very, very few times in the life of either horse or man? Well, it was all the same to Nabob, the thunder of whose hoofs swept by the fork in the trail as though he had known from the very first.

Some fifteen or twenty minutes after flinging his last words at Random, Bon Ord brought Nabob to a sudden halt in the shadow of the old house of rock and logs that stood in the middle of a mountainside clearing. From a distance they had seen a light shining out through an uncurtained window. As they came closer a veritable mob of dogs rushed out, baying furiously. By the time they stopped a door was opened and some one stood looking out curiously to see who was this headlong night-rider. The form in the door was to be seen but very indistinctly, creating a vague shadowy blur, since the light was not in this room but an adjoining one and only dim straggling rays penetrated this far.

Bon Ord had to shout to make his voice heard above the dogs' barking. Plainly he saw sufficiently well to understand that the figure in the half-open door was not that of the man he wanted, for he called sharply:

"Is Leather Hide in?"

"No."

It was a girl's voice. The door began closing slowly.

"Where is he?" demanded Bon Ord.

"Don't know."

"Has he been here this afternoon?"

She appeared in no haste to answer; he repeated his question with impatient emphasis and for answer had another brief:

"No."

"Anybody else here?"

Again she was more than deliberate; the end of her deliberations appeared to be to ignore the question entirely.

"Answer me!" cried Bon Ord. "Is any one else here?"

"You're asking a mighty lot of questions, Mister!" she retorted, swift enough now, and with a bang the door shut. He heard a heavy bar fall into place.

So there was some one at the house? Who? It might make no difference, might have no slightest bearing on the single matter that concerned him—and it might. He slipped noiselessly down from Nabob's back, ran around the house, found a rear door in the dark and, just as footsteps came hurrying down a long, carpetless hallway, he jerked the door open and stepped in. The girl, a candle in her hand now, stopped where she was and regarded him with steady eyes. But Bon Ord now ignored her as, carrying his rifle in his right hand, he stepped past her and into the lighted room. He had but a sidelong glimpse of her as he brushed by her; he had never had much more of a view of old Leather Hide's girl; had he been asked at any time to describe her he must have had to scratch his head and answer vaguely that she looked like a boy dressed in his sister's ragged old dress.

But now he was thinking of something else; of the man he came upon in Leather Hide's house. No mere flash of a glance sufficed him now; Bon Ord stood stock still and rigid, so intent was the piercing look he bestowed upon Leather Hide's visitor. Or visitor to Leather Hide's girl?

The man was a stranger; Bon Ord had never seen

him until now. Well, strangers were no new things here. He sat in a chair by a table, the fingers of his left hand busy with nervous pickings at the cloth, the right hand kept down and in such a way that it was hidden by the table. That was what Bon Ord noted first of all. But he was swift to mark other details; how the man was big and paunchy, with an unhealthy looking skin; how his jowls were heavy, his eyes small and close together; how there was the red mark of a hat band upon a shining forehead, and how the forehead sloped back sharply to a bald crown shaped to suggest the smaller end of an egg. The man was well dressed or, rather, would have appeared well dressed in the same suit a couple of days before; now he looked to have slept in his garments, which were torn here and there and stained. A city man, Bon explained him; one whom, of course, the law wanted somewhere for some dirty and cowardly brand of crime.

"Where's Leather Hide?" Bon demanded of him.

The man's expression changed swiftly; he sat back a little in his chair. He, too, had been tense; there had been a look of anxiety in his eyes. He expelled a great breath and affected geniality.

"Now, brother, ain't that just exactly what I've been asking this here young lady? I'm looking for him myself; you see, I'm in the lumber business and——"

"How long have you been here?" he was interrupted sharply.

The gross looking man glanced at a pretty little wrist watch sunk into the flesh of his left wrist.

"Hours," he announced, nodding his head vigorously. "Got here a little after noon. This young lady here, she and me——"

Bon turned and went out. The heavy-jowled man reached out with his left hand and drew to him the tumbler of amber liquor standing in an intricacy of little circles where liquor had spilled and the tumbler had made its patterns of it. The girl had not stirred. A sudden flash lighted up her eyes as Bon hurried by her the second time. She said nothing but watched him as he hastened on his way, out through the door, into the night.

At his whistle Nabob came to him, flailing out to right and left at over-inquisitive dogs. Bon Ord mounted and Nabob was off like a shot. Almost immediately the horse understood where they went from here; where he had thought to go in the beginning: to that lonely cabin on the river bank where the canyon was dark and narrow and the water in its rocky channel sped on the maddest of all races among boulders; to the spot they visited so frequently together.

"Where has Leather Hide been all day, Nabob, old boy?" muttered the rider darkly. "What's he been doing?"

Nabob could only sense something wrong, could only do his best to come at its righting by carrying his master along in a fresh burst of speed. Thus they cut straight across the billowy field, over the top of a straggling stake-and-rider fence of split rails and into the forest again at the spot where the trail was to be picked up. And then along as before, over logs, under the snatching arms of branches, down steep slopes where they set streams of loose soil and stones pouring along after them and at last to a sight of the river again. From a ridge they saw it in one of its wild bends, a thing of power and savage beauty, white-

maned, froth-flecked, shouting with many voices. From a second eminence they saw it again where it shot as straight as an arrow through a steep walled pass, to pour itself into the little lake spread out like a great mirror under the stars; saw the tiny, wooded isle at the lake's center, a spot they knew well, these two, since many the time Nabob had swum out to it, his master swimming at his side, clinging to the stirrup, shouting joyous encouragement to him, making this a fine game. The river poured itself down into the mountain lake over a steep, smooth wall of rock, and in the starlight the tumbling water was all white lace and leaping jewels; while at the end the same river went rushing away, as though in turbulent haste to lose itself in the thick dark of the rocky gorge.

Lake and river were together blotted out by the wall of the forest that seemed to race along to meet them. The thick woods were all about them now; sweet woodsy smells, the strangely poignant and pungent fragrances that steal out by night in little wisps and puffs of redolence until they are almost like a thin, cloying mist, rose from the earth bosom; from trampled weeds and shaken boughs an aromatic spiciness spread out through the air. An owl called, sounding lonely and far away; something stirred in the bushes and was still.

They came down to the river again, a mile above the little lake. And here, not disclosed by any light, not proclaimed by any voices, a quiet, secret place, discerned because they knew where to find it, was the cabin they had come so far to visit. It stood on the extreme brink of a low sheer cliff at whose granite base the water roared and stormed along; on all but one side

it was hidden by the black firs standing thick about it; that one unhidden part was the one toward the river. Four-fifths of the long, squat, ugly building was lost among the trees, while one end, thrust forth with an air of defiance, was supported on great log joists which projected some six feet out over the cliff edge. Even this portion of the structure was not to be seen from any considerable distance, so did the mountain ridges encroach on the view, so did the river twist around them.

Bon Ord dismounted a hundred yards from the cabin and went forward on foot; he stopped twice and stood very still to listen—most of all to think. At the second pause he stepped aside into a dense thicket of young firs and hid his rifle; the weapon in his heavy holster pulled at his belt and would suffice him in any contingency now.

He went on quietly until he came to the door; even now there was no ray of light and only a faint, blurred hum of voices. This cabin of Leather Hide's was a sturdy affair and had been built with a very particular purpose to serve.

At the door he paused again briefly. Not to seek to listen now, merely to prepare against the entrance he was bent on making. He would throw his voice in a slightly lower register, a trick he had caught years ago, and slowing down his own naturally quick utterance, give a very excellent imitation of Sheriff John Ord's voice.

"Open—in the name of the law!" called Bon Ord, and flung the unbarred door back.

As quick as a flash now he was in the lamp-lighted room, his eyes darting here and there, from face to

face, as keen as a cat's that would watch two or three rat holes simultaneously. There were five men here; it was his business to catch the slightest shifting of expression upon any single face. If any man of them started and made the first sign of a gesture toward his gun; if fear dawned, even fleetingly, in any pair of eyes; if guile betrayed itself by look or gesture, Bon Ord must not miss the first hint of it.

It was but what Bon Ord himself was ready to admit a long shot, and lost. Five men regarded him closely as he came in; five men were for an instant rigid and still; five men, seeing who it was, laughed.

"Hello, Bon," said one of them with a grunt. "Don't you know you might scare a man clean to death that way? Sounded just like your old man."

This was Leather Hide himself, a tall, thin man of middle age, with a long, thin face, sunken cheeks and hot, restless eyes; eyes always like those of a man burning with fever. He was clad roughly like the others, one would have said at first glance, only to note that his soft shirt was of silk, his trousers of flannel, his high boots of fine leather and new. He had big red hands but no hint of that "leatheriness" that might have been expected by any one hearing the nickname men gave him; the skin was soft. And one of his great red, blunt fingers was adorned by an emerald that had cost Leather Hide fifteen hundred dollars—and he knew emerald values. He had a large loose mouth, his lips just now pursed up about his slim cigar; and his neck, which like his hands was an almost fiery red, was inordinately long; upthrust above his soft collar it suggested a gobbler—or a turkey buzzard.

Bon Ord threw himself into a chair, shoved his hat back, and laughed into their faces.

"I lost a bet with myself then," he chuckled. "Expected to see five pairs of boots going out the windows! Say, dad must get his share of fun, popping in on a crowd like that. Got a notion to run against him for the job next election."

"We'll vote for you, kid," laughed Leather Hide, in a childish sort of delight. "To the last man of us."

"And all be deputies," said Vickers.

Bon looked off to Vickers as though considering the suggestion. Here was Leather Hide's right-hand man; a man who at those times when Leather Hide was away was to be dealt with as one in authority. Young, swarthy, compact, and powerful, he would have been even handsome were there not a look of bestiality stamped upon him; his features were good and might have been fine, had another sort of spirit dwelt within him. Cruel and vicious—rankly evil—Ralph Vickers.

"He could have done it," said Bon Ord within himself. "Leather Hide could have done it. One of the Italians, Marco or Tony, could have done it. Mike Brady, there, could have done it——"

"I say," spoke up Mike Brady on the instant, a little man with swimming eyes, red-lidded, and a dreary, drooping reddish mustache, "what about the cards?"

Bon looked at him—, yes, Mike could have done it—, then lounged through the room and to its far end; the end overjutting the river. He had dragged his chair along with him and now placed it carefully, reaching out and pulling the table along.

"This is my lucky spot," he said. "And I feel it in my bones that I'm lucky to-night. Pull up, boys. Who's got the cards?"

No man could have killed Dick Delamere just a

few hours ago, and not have the details right now at the very top of his mind. He couldn't shuffle a deck without remembering; could not make his discard and call for cards without half his brain racing, racing, racing with those vivid details; couldn't keep the whole of his mind upon the pot, even when he stood to lose or win heavily. No, it couldn't be done, judged Bon Ord, glancing about from face to face genially. He had to watch; before long he'd pick out his man; Leather Hide or Vickers? Mike Brady or Marco or Tony?

"Where've you been all day, Bon?" asked Leather Hide casually.

But the most simple and casual remark filled Bon's whole mind for the moment. A question like that might signify—nothing or everything.—If Leather Hide knew, would he not want to know now if Bon Ord knew? If he had been at his cabin?

"Poking around," he retorted carelessly. "Came by your place just now, by the way. There's some one there looking for you?"

"Who?" asked Leather Hide, twisting his cigar.

Bon described him. Leather Hide and Vickers looked at each other.

"He'll wait," said Vickers in his soft, purring voice. "Deal 'em up, Bon."

"Told you I was in luck," said Bon, who had won the deal. He emptied his pocket and set his pile of money in front of him. "Don't say I haven't warned you."

While the cards were falling Leather Hide went to a cupboard for bottle and glasses. A sister bottle to the one Bon had recently offered his captive, Random, at his own cabin, and one that had found its way into

this wilderness part of California from Canada, in the north.

"Seen Dick Delamere, anybody?" asked Vickers. "He's late."

Every bit as casual as Leather Hide's question did Vicker's careless inquiry sound. No one answered; all were busy with their cards; evidently no one knew anything of Delamere—or cared to tell what he did know. No one had indicated any faintest hint of uneasiness at the name; Bon was altogether too keenly alert to have missed the tremor of an eyelid.

"What have you birds been doing to make the day go by?" This time, flipping out his discard, it was Bon himself who asked the question.

It was Leather Hide who answered:

"Me and Vickers was off in Red Canyon all afternoon," and fell to refilling his pipe from a familiar battered old tobacco box.

Either one could have done it. Both could have done it. Was there any significance in their having been together—at least in asserting that they were together—when the thing happened?

Four men called for cards; three stayed in until the final showdown. Laughingly Bon drew in the first winnings.

In silence they warmed to the game. Bon rolled his cigarettes and appeared to be in his habitual, serene good humor. Yet his hair-trigger alertness never for a single instant deserted him. He listened to the intonation of every voice, measured the steadiness of each hand, watched for any sign of nervousness—and found none. If a drop of liquor were spilled, if a card slipped from a man's hand, if a man spoke or if he were silent, in-

evitably he drew upon himself Bon's seemingly careless but really desperately concentrated attention. Each man appeared his natural self; each played as he had always played.

It could have been any one of them—or none of them. It could have been the stranger, waiting at Leather Hide's house. He, too, had an alibi of a sort; at least Leather Hide's girl had not contradicted him when, looking at his lady's wrist watch, he had declared that he had been at the house since noon.

"What did you want at my house?" asked Leather Hide around his cigar, thus again centring that alert attention upon himself.

"Same old thing," said Bon.

"Ready to do business?" asked Leather Hide sharply. "Got the cash?"

"I've got it lined up," said Bon. "I'm ready; yes."

"Wish I'd been there, then. I've got a place to put the money right now; every cent of it. If it wasn't for that, Kid, you'd never get that piece of land so cheap."

"I'm offering you all it's worth and you know it, you old pirate," laughed Bon.

Leather Hide grunted.

"There's that man waiting for me," he said; "I'm doing a bit of business with him. He's in the lumber trade." They all laughed; he went on as though there had been no interruption: "He deals in cash money; the same as me. You come over in the morning, Bon, with the coin in your pocket—and the prettiest section of land in these mountains is yours."

Were it not for that thing which lay back yonder in Bon Ord's cabin, Bon's eyes would have sparkled

now. For years he and Leather Hide had been on the verge of making this deal. The prettiest bit of land in these mountains? Yes, it was all of that! Was there anything like it elsewhere on earth? The little lake with its central, wooded isle, the thick, still forest lands about it, threaded by the river at its best and boldest—a demesne that Bon Ord, since boyhood, had yearned to make his own.

“The cash—to-morrow some time? Why, sure!”

All looked at him interestedly; all knew the status of the case, having heard it mentioned a score of times.

Vickers, dealing, observed:

“Nine thousand dollars, in cash, in a man’s pocket! Poking around out through the woods here!—Say, Bon, let me know the time and what trail you’re taking, will you? Maybe I wouldn’t like a chance like that to help in the good old game of separating a fool and his money!”

They laughed. One man suggested:

“That’s a lot of coin to get hold of, in the first place! Where’d you find it, Bon? Let me in on it? Been murdering some poor guy for his roll?”

Bon’s eyes drifted to a meeting with those cruel, keen eyes of Vicker’s. Was Vickers the man?

“Maybe,” said Leather Hide, “he got some of it off his poet! Was he flush, Bon?”

Bon looked very innocent.

“Do you know,” he said gravely, “it never entered his fool head of mine that a poet might have any money on him! I did get something from him, though. A song. Goes like this.”

He had a fine voice for singing, this Bon Ord whose heart was tuned to song, and he filled the dingy cabin

with the sudden burst of melody which he poured out.

"I'm rollicksome, frolicsome, devil-may-care,
With joy in my heart and vine leaves in my hair.
I'm the foam on the beaker, the glint on the sword;
The young sun at glad morning—I'm bonny Bon Ord!"

They applauded noisily, all but the man who was dealing the cards.

"Sh!" said Leather Hide commandingly.

His hand was up, his head turned after the fashion of one who listens intently.

"Some one coming?" said Mike Brady. "Dick, maybe——"

But Bon knew it wasn't Dick Delamere. Did Mike know? It could have been Mike——

As a hand was laid on the door Bon Ord swept the lamp from the table and leaped to his feet. The room was plunged into darkness. Other men had jumped up; there was a scraping of feet; the sound of a chair toppled over.

"Watch your step in there!" a sudden voice boomed out, the voice of Sheriff Ord now in dead earnest. "I've got your shack surrounded; the first man to make a break gets shot down."

Yes, the sheriff was here. But then Bon had known all along that his father would lose little time in coming straight here from the other cabin. And that was why he had chosen his seat so carefully—at the far end of the cabin where it jutted out over the river. In the dark he groped for the trap-door in the floor. He got it open and sat down with his legs dangling through. He meant to draw the trap closed as he dropped. A

clean fall of ten or fifteen feet into the deepest of the water. A handy arrangement for Leather Hide who, once or twice in his life, had had to compromise with circumstances and pour out a small fortune in liquor.

Another instant and Bon would have made his escape; let them then open the door and have their crowd in with lights. No one need know that Bon Ord had been here to-night—unless one of the men with him cared to tell. *Would any tell?* That man, if any did, would be the one——

But as he was about to slip through to swing by his hands before dropping, a man's hand reached out and caught him, jerking him back. At that moment the door opened. Bon, on his feet again, lashed out and by chance as much as through his own effort, his blow landed square in some man's face. Freed, he leaped back to the trap door. He jerked it open, slipped through, loosed his hold and dropped——

It doesn't take a man long to fall a dozen feet or so, but with such swiftness did his brain function that, before he felt the racing water about him, and over him, he wished with all his heart that he had not remained in the cabin. For he knew something now: The man who had killed Dick Delamere was one of the men in the room above. That man had snatched at him, to hold him back, to see him turned over to the law. Why else strive to detain him? Bon Ord, instead of beating him off, should have thrown both arms about that man, holding him tight, calling out: "This is the man!"

He went down deep, into quiet water; he rose to begin his desperate struggle with the fury of water slashing against the boulders in the stream, rushing

against the jagged rocks of the banks. The din of the river's thunderous voices was in his ears; but even above that did he hear Sheriff Ord's voice booming out:

"Downstream, men, to get him when he crawls out. If he makes a break for it, shoot on sight."

And Bon Ord settled down into the biggest fight of his life. By day it were little less than madness to try to swim with this mad current; in the dark it became next door to suicidal folly. It was too dark to see anything, except here and there angry white plumes flung up where the current crashed into a rock. And already men were running along the river bank, armed men in just the right mood for hot work.

He had meant to come ashore not more than thirty feet below the pool into which he plunged. That was not to be thought of now; he would have to take his chances with this devil's own mill-race——

And right up there, in the cabin from which he was being borne along so swiftly, was the man he wanted!

CHAPTER V

FROM the beginning Bon's battle with Wild River was like that of a man caught and dragged down by a landslide. The struggle of the sentient against the insensate, of the mortal against that which might not be stricken by any blow. In it seemed all the futility of a sword cleaving empty air that ever closed over the invisible wound, the hopelessness and helplessness of a creature caught in the multiple folds of some invulnerable, great dragon; the epic strife of man, who held himself conqueror and master of nature, and who came suddenly upon a tremendous natural force in sudden rebellion. He strove mightily, grim and desperate; the river shouted thunderously in derision, poured its floods over him, whipped him this way and that in its many currents that were as strong and merciless as tentacles of an octopus, spun him about, drew him down, bent on battering the very will to live out of his body before killing him with more leisured strangulation.

"Down to the lake!" boomed out the sheriff's voice. "Watch the waterfall! He'll try to swim the rapids!"

Bon heard, though indistinctly through the thunder of the water raging through its narrow chasm. That was John Ord, watching for him; John Ord, rifle in hand and ready; John Ord, his father. A straightforward, square-dealing man who had once told him: "Get yourself in trouble, Bon, and I'll hunt you down as I would any of the crooks you run with, and with

no more compunction. With less, if anything; for you know better and have had your chance and your warning." Ord was like the river; from him one would look for no mercy, no relenting, no faintest flicker of compassion. In the course of his duty considerations by the way, personal or otherwise, did not exist.

Bon was not surprised now; he felt no resentment, no anger. Just as there was no bitterness in him against the water that engulfed him, so there was none against his father. He battled with the river, but not in anger. In the same way must he pit himself against his father.

He struck out for midstream, seeking to swim with the current. He was dressed lightly, since it was summer, but there had been no time to kick off his high boots. They filled and were like leaden weights. In still water he could have pulled them off; now he could not spare a hand to the purpose. As it was, it was with the narrowest margin that he was flung past a rock that lifted a spray-veiled crest above the churning current. He won clear of it only to be hurled along toward another against which he was thrown with so violent an impact that the breath was jolted out of his body. Gasping, laboring for air, he was carried on.

He could see little, what with night in the canyon and the water that was always slapping against his face, filling his eyes. Sometimes he stared mistily upstream; again, spun about, he saw black water rushing, white spray flashing and weaving the starlight into its shifting fabric. Swimming when he could, he labored away from the white water, quested the black water. And all the while, going along with a furious speed, he was thinking of the approach to the lake; of the

waterfall pouring itself down into a boiling caldron lashing itself into mist and foam. If he got that far—alive—he would find at least one man there, waiting for him. If only one, then John Ord, commanding him ashore—or determined to sink him with a rifle bullet.

Now the channel ahead of him straightened out, running straight and narrow, without obstruction, almost incredibly swift. He swam with it with all his might. He'd race them to the waterfall! They'd have to run over rocks, around thick timber and, alive or done with that great leaping glory called life, he's come first to the sheer natural spillway. And then? Over it—down into the lake—and take his chances with any man on the shore who called him to give up.

Swimming fiercely, conscious of an ever-increasing weight pulling downward at his feet, experiencing a sharp pain in his shoulder, growing intolerable, gnawing—the numbness of a moment ago, when he had been thrown against the sunken rock, had passed with this sudden stab of pain—he was sped along like a log caught in a mill-race.

Could any see him from the banks? Only a dark head against the black water; they'd need quick eyes to mark him. He had his chance yet—if he could live through the hell of the rapids among the menacing crags which still lay ahead of him.

He hardly knew how matters happened with him after that. He braced his nerves, took a deep draught of air—and was in the midst of whirlpools that gripped and twisted, eddies that drew him under, deep currents that rolled him upon a gravelly bottom, black rocks that seemed to leap at him and against which

now an arm, now a leg struck with fearful shock. Into an inferno of turbulence, come with a rush, sped with a rush, hurled on through—and the thunder of the cascade roared in his ears. Louder and louder—like the thunder of an onrushing engine——

Arms seemed about him, arms to snatch him up, to toss him outward, to hurl him downward. This was the waterfall—he was going to buy it from Leather Hide—he caught wildly at its white, tossing mane as though he could ride it like a horse, give him a handhold, kneehold, any sort of grip.

Down. Down among ten thousand little bubbles, down and down and down. His senses were reeling; bruised and battered, half choked with water, weak from stress and strain, he struggled feebly. His whole being cried out for respite, for an instant of rest—rest, were it to be come at only through the gates of death. The weight of his boots, the weight of his sodden clothes—the weight of the heart within him——

His lungs felt as though they would burst. With a mighty effort, one which his tortured body would make though his brain refused to drive it, he beat his way upward. The harder he labored, the more insistent was the need of air. He rose slowly, painfully slowly, yet he rose steadily. The only question was, would his lungs, insistent on filling with air, fill with water before he could come to the top? He had to hold on; just hold on and keep holding on—though his senses swooned into blackness, though he was beaten—had been beaten long ago—There was an old saying; his dad had picked it up somewhere and liked it: “When you get to the end of your rope—tie a knot in it—and hang on——”

His head rose above a calm sheet of water; he saw the stars that he had forgotten about, down there in the depths; he saw the real, true glory of the star-studded night sky for the first time in his life. He drank the air in—what glorious, tinglingly glorious things there were in the world! Stars—air!

No voice called out to him. He floated quietly, low in the water. Presently he made out that the current had carried him out toward the middle of the lake. He had been under water a long while and all the while had been kept travelling onward. Even now he was drifting, though slowly, almost imperceptibly, in fact. He could see the waterfall; what a difference it made, having a thing like that before one—or behind! Against the skyline he saw a man there, standing on a rock. They still waited for him then, to come down stream! But they did not realize how fast a man might travel, galloping with Wild River!

He began swimming again, guardedly, striving to make never a ripple. A little breeze blew; he was grateful for it since it broke, if but gently, the placidity of the lake; its wavelets slapped against his face; they might help him in going on undetected. He filled his lungs with the wonderful air, sank slowly, swam under water as long as he could, rose slowly for air again. Steadily he was moving out toward the middle of the lake; toward the little wooded island. He was going to buy it from Leather Hide; it was as good as his, now; it was waiting for him out there. And, taking another draught of air, drinking deep of it and gratefully, he sank quietly again and again swam under water.

It was no great way to go; this little mountain

lake, being not over half a mile from shore to shore, held its pigmy island almost in its centre. A quarter of a mile only from the waterfall; scarcely half that distance from him now. Something of the grim look was gone from his face when next the glint of the stars, friendly stars, shone in his eyes; something of the laughing look of Bon Ord came back to him. It was a lark—this game he played with his good old dad!

But he still had ahead of him the longest eighth of a mile he had ever travelled. Only now did he grow conscious of the piercing cold; it struck deeper and deeper. His arms and legs grew weaker; his shoulder went numb again and the numbness spread down his side. Each time, having swum under water, he found it harder to rise to the surface. He tried to get his boots off; they clung to his feet as though set in glue. In this attempt he went down swiftly; it taxed him fearfully to beat his way up again.

He heard a voice shouting. Only a few words reached him and even these muffled; it was as though his ears were stuffed with cotton. His father commanding: "—a boat—"

There was an old boat at the edge of a little cove; it had not been used a dozen times, Bon supposed, in a dozen years. Of course the sheriff would know of it. And of course he would think of the island, know that Bon might, through the sheerest of good luck, make his way alive over the waterfall. There would be a patrol on the lake in a minute now; eyes would be set like sentinels upon the island.

With set teeth, white face grim again, Bon set himself to overcome the crushing inertia of the weariness upon him, and labored on. No more under-water

swimming; he knew that if he went down it would be for the last time. They were busy at the boat; they were not likely to notice him.

In five minutes more the thing was done. The gently lapping water washed him quietly against the base of the rocky cliff at the island's northern end. There were trees above; he was in the shadow now. He caught at a rock, and steadied himself, resting briefly. He could see them pushing the boat off. He began swimming again; the water was very deep here and cold. His teeth were chattering like mad. He went on some twenty feet, keeping close to the rocky shore line. Ahead he saw a clump of willows, trailing their drooping branches in the lake. That was the place! A rare good thing for Bon Ord to-night that he had loved this spot so well, that he knew its every nook and cranny by heart. Under the willows; there was the place.

He caught a branch and drew himself ashore. There was a split in the cliff here; a narrow fissure in which the water rose and fell placidly. He crept into this fissure, out of the water to a little grassy space with a roof of the weathered rock above, and threw himself flat down.

He could do no more for the present. He shook from head to foot with a chill that penetrated to his bones. He was sore in a dozen places where he had been pounded against the rocks, exhausted from the effort which had taxed every muscle, every nerve.

He was familiar with other spots on the little island where a man might lie snugly concealed; but no place better than this one. The narrow fissure in the cliffs was as good as a shut door, for above the rocks roofed

him while the fringing willows through which he had crawled screened his hiding-place from the lake. He ran little risk of being found here, so long as he lay quiet, and he wanted nothing just now but to lie stretched out, resting. His hands were lax at his sides, his eyes shut; only little by little did he begin to breathe regularly.

After a while, how long he did not know, he heard voices. They reached him dimly, as from a distance, yet he knew that John Ord would never give over his determined search until he had been very thorough-going. Of course they would come out to the little island, some of them; Ord himself, no doubt. So Bon sat up at last—"to see if he was whole or in pieces"—and made what preparations he could against any contingency. He tugged at his soaked boots and at last got them off and poured the water out of them; no more swimming to-night with boots on! He chafed his icy feet between his palms, brought the blood back to them, got them tingling. Nights were always cool in these mountains, be the day as balmy as it pleased; his wet garments clung freezingly to him. He got them off, wrung them as dry with his shaking hands as he could, and spread them out to dry further in the air. Then with handfuls of grass he rubbed himself as a man might groom his horse until in the end, though he still shivered, some faint glow of warmth returned to him. Now, if he had to run for it, he could run; if he had to swim again, he could swim—but the very thought of dipping down again into the waters of the lake set his quivering flesh twitching in rebellion.

"A man never knows when he's well off," mused Bon Ord. "Just to have a cigarette—now, that's

luxury! A hot cup of coffee, say,—better than a big diamond, a gold medal and a king's crown, all rolled into one! And a good warm shirt isn't to be sneezed at, come right down to it; or even a dry horse blanket, as to that. It's a great little old world, Mr. Bon Ord."

Now he heard the dip of oars, strongly plied. He moved a little so that he could peer out through his willows; there came the old boat, ungainly and awkward and hard to handle, yet making fair headway as its one oarsman urged it along.

"Dad, himself," grunted Bon Ord. "I knew it. Never yet did send some one else to do his job for him. He's pretty sure, then, that I'm out here."

He drew back again, back to where he had left his clothes and still farther. It was very dark where he was, yet memory, winging back to his boyhood days, came to his aid; for here had been a boy's lair where he lay out alone in the golden days of inarticulate dreams, when he headed his own Robin Hood band or skimmed the little lake with Captain Kidd; here he had had his treasure trove: an old sheath knife, a rusty old gun, a pair of field glasses, truly excellent saving that the lenses were gone. Long as it had been since he had crept in here, a matter of years, he found his way now very readily. Taking his dripping clothes with him, he crept on a dozen paces deeper into the fissure and here stopped, since he could go no farther, the rocks closed in all about him.

"Now, Dad, you're it," he muttered. "Bet you a horse you can't find me!"

He was bound to be gay about it; else he had not been Bon Ord. Yet deep down, far below the insouciant surface, deep in the heart of him he could not

but be bitterly regretful. To be hunted thus, in grim, deadly earnest by his own father; that cut like a poisoned lash. Good old Dad, rare old sport! This would be cutting him, too; cutting to the bone and to the marrow of his bones. There was a strong bond of sympathy between these two, father and son; and there was not less of understanding. "Outside business," they had the way of saying, they were first-rate pals. They rode together, they fished together, they spent some of the finest days of their lives camping together far out in the wilderness, very far from all other men. Yet it was understood that each must tread his own path; one the reckless path that was Bon Ord's, one the straight path of a relentless duty. Whenever those two paths crossed, each had known all along, they must be less than strangers to each other.

The dipping oars came steadily on; there was the scrape of the flat bottom as the boat grounded in a strip of sandy beach where the cliffs broke down abruptly. Sheriff Ord was on the island. And, Bon knew, he would be in no hurry to depart.

"It's like him to stay all night—to camp here a week!"

The sheriff went methodically but swiftly about what he had to do. The island was so small that, had it been clear of timber, he could have finished with it in ten minutes. But it was a full hour before he went back to his boat, and Bon was surprised that he went so soon. But he did not know that while John Ord looked here for him he had but the faintest thought—the faintest hope?—than Bon had ever reached this tiny haven. For no man had seen him shoot down stream; no man had seen him plunge over the waterfall. One

look at the raging waters which raced down to the lake was enough to make any man ask himself: "Could any swimmer on earth ever win safely through?" And if, say, a man's head struck against one of the many rocks, what was the inevitable end? One clothed and booted as they knew Bon Ord to have been must have gone down, deep down, in the lake; and men have sunk in the bottomless mountain lakes and have never been seen again.

Yet even now, knowing all this, Sheriff Ord in his boat completed his methodical search. He rowed about the island, close to shore, stopping again and again to peer into dark possible lurking places. He brushed against the fringing willows, probing among their branches; yet, obsessed by a certain thought—a certain fear—he went on. The island entirely encircled from the water, he turned again and rowed back to the mainland. Bon Ord watched him go.

During the next couple of hours he heard voices several times, coming to him faintly from a considerable distance. Then the night grew intensely silent. And then, when he thought they had given up for the present and would be awaiting daylight to make any further search, he heard oars for the second time. A man was out on the lake, questing back and forth, up and down, along the lake shores and on out into the deeper water. It was his father again and——

Now it dawned on Bon Ord that the sheriff was looking not for him but—just for his body.

"Poor old dad," he muttered. "He's sent the others home; he's making this his own job. He thinks I'm done for."

He could imagine himself in his father's boots,

their rôles reversed. It was sheer torture that the man out there was experiencing; he wouldn't show it, of course, and he wouldn't admit it to himself; yet torture it was. Bon Ord parted the willows; he was going to shout: "Here I am, old-timer! I'm all right!" and then duck and run for it again. But swift memory of all that had happened that night held him still and hesitant. The man who had killed Dick Delamere had been one of the crowd in Leather Hide's old remote cabin. Leather Hide himself? Or Vickers? Or Mike Brady? Or—possibly—one of the Italians? One of the five, certainly. Otherwise there had never been that impulsive attempt in the dark room to hold him back; him, the scapegoat. Which one? It was Bon Ord's job to find out. And, if he called out now to the sheriff, what chance had he? John Ord would never let him escape him the second time, for John Ord wasn't that sort of man.

It is well to know the other man thoroughly. Another son now might have thought to say: "Look here, dad; we're all alone. Nobody will know a thing of it. All you've got to do is let me go and say nothing." But this couldn't be Bon Ord talking with John Ord. This was not "outside business." John Ord would merely say: "Take your medicine, Kid. Go to jail where you belong and do your talking to the judge."

So now, tugged one way by heart strings and another by a cooler determination, Bon Ord watched and kept his own counsel. But it was with a deep sigh of relief that, after a long while, he saw the boat return to shore and presently, from afar, heard the clatter of hoofs.

"And now what?"

Where he lay was as good a place as any—for a limited time. He had water; he'd have tobacco of a sort when it dried out. But the question of food must present itself.

It was now perhaps two o'clock in the morning. At this season of young summer the day would come early. If he left the island, it must be now. Otherwise he must lie, holed-up here, until night came again.

If he had as much as a cheese sandwich he'd know what to do; he'd make it his rations for to-morrow and to-morrow night he'd be on his way. But having nothing of the sort he'd best be travelling now. There was no sense in beginning such an uncertain and hazardous adventure as lay ahead of him on an empty stomach. There'd be hard miles and little food in the work he saw cut out for him; best be about it.

"And I'm not believing all my eyes and ears tell me, either," he grinned to himself. "Dad's gone; the rest are gone—if you believe what you see and hear. But it's ten to one the old fox has set a circle of eyes all about this place. Oh, I know you down to your boot heels, Johnny Ord."

He returned to his clothes; wet and cold yet and far from inviting even to a man as cold as he was. He'd make a roll of them, fasten the roll to his shoulders and try to get them not much wetter than they now were. There were his boots to carry, too; a man without boots in these mountains was a man contending with a fearful handicap. Unless, of course, he had a horse. He wondered what old Nabob had done? Gone home by now, no doubt.

Then there was, finally, his revolver that had swum long with him and that asked for a thorough clean-

ing and wiping dry. All these articles were scattered about him. He began groping for them in the dark. And, before he had done, his questing fingers came upon a sizable tin can with a tightly fitted lid.

"Now who the deuce are you, friend?" asked Bon Ord, puzzled a bit. "Who told you to come to the party? Who brought you, I'd like to know. I didn't, that's sure."

He got off the lid and explored the tin's interior. Little parcels inside, smaller tins—a box of matches! Fine. In an instant he had a light, carefully screened by his body.

A package of raisins; some nuts; a handful of dates; a packet of coffee! Wee dabs of salt, pepper, sugar!

"There ought to be tobacco; that's sure!"

But there was none. A tiny can of condensed milk; a very dry crust of bread. And that was all. All—but a very great deal, when you come to ponder on it. Enough certainly to make a man reconsider his plans. It was as though the good fairies, acquainted with his dilemma, had come to the rescue. While they were doing it, though, why leave out the tobacco? Which is a man's way of accepting the bounties of life; always to look for the omissions.

Now the burning question became: "Who brought and left these things here? And why?"

He remembered the villainous-looking man he had seen a few hours ago at Leather Hide's house. A man with fear trembling in his little close eyes, fear and evil. A queer customer. Many queer customers came and went through Leather Hide's life, as Bon Ord well knew. Whence they came, where they went, that was Leather Hide's affair; the affair of a man whose busi-

ness at times seemed to be this strange traffic in queer customers.

"That chap had been hiding out somewhere," ruminated Bon. "You could tell, just looking at him; pine gum and needles sticking to his clothes. Why not here? This has all the earmarks of a hang out."

Well, the man had gone and not returned. Probably he'd not come back at all. And if he did? A fugitive himself, as his whole look and attitude proclaimed, he'd sooner offer the hand of fellowship than run to the officers of the law.

"Thanks, Mr. Tin Can," said Bon, his arm about the thing he addressed friendliwise. "I'll spend the night with you and perhaps to-morrow. We'll have a snack; we'll make a tiny blaze to dry our clothes; and then we'll take a nap."

An hour later Bon found himself again experiencing his habitual glow of well-being. He was warmly clad again, even to his boots, which had shrunk a good deal and required to have their leather slit here and there for the sake of comfort. He had even had his cigarette. Thereafter, stretched out with his arm for pillow, he had his sleep.

He awoke in the very early morning. The sun was not yet astir, only the flush of dawn was in the sky, the vital sweetness of the new day in the air. He heard the intermingled morning sounds, at first faint and blended meaninglessly in his ears; the splash of water where the lake slapped gently against the rocky rim of his island, a gush of melody from a cheery bird somewhere near by, a more distant trill from afar.

He sat up to look about him. Certainly none of these accustomed sounds had awakened him; then,

what? Some disturbing noise had penetrated his drugged consciousness. What was it? Sitting very still, all ears and eyes, he waited——

Nor did he have to wait long. The willows constituting a verdant screen between him and the lake parted; a face appeared; a figure took form swiftly. The newcomer, clearly knowing every step here, familiar with each little detail, came on. And Bon Ord, seeing clearly his early visitor, could only stare—and wonder.

CHAPTER VI

It might have been Aurora herself, that rosy fingered goddess of the dawn. Here sped one whose heavenly task should have been the opening of the pearly gates of the morning. Each new day should enter flushed and smiling, tiptoe to her beckoning. She should tell the spring flowers where and when to bloom; she should teach the lark to sing, the little soft gray dove to croon in the summer afternoons. From her swift light step, from the way she lifted her hands, the way she turned to look back over her shoulder, Bon Ord knew all of this even before in the tender morning light he saw her face.

A piquant face it was, a saucy it well could be; a face never to be forgotten. How her eyes flew open and what big eyes, what soft eyes, what Venus-gray eyes they were! Aurora—Venus—goddesses and goddesses only suggesting themselves!

For a moment they stared at each other speechlessly. He had seen her first; she had not glimpsed him until, with the fringe of willows behind her, she had stepped lightly toward the depths of his hiding-place. Thin as the new day's light was, it was ample and for a spell they stood there regarding each other as though he and she had at the same moment come face to face with the final and crowning wonder of the world—which was a simple statement of a glorious fact, Bon Ord would have maintained.

"I figured it out last night," said Bon Ord, grave as to voice, eyes dancing, "that I had poked my old nose

into the spot where the fairies hold their high jinks! Good morning—Queen Titania. I hope your majesty slept well last night and is this morning well disposed toward mere mortals.

Thus on he went. Goddesses first, fairies next, on the high road to coming to a certain particular girl who had it in her, so far as Bon Ord was concerned, to prove a deal more disturbing than either.

He could have sworn that for a poised moment she was on the verge of flight. Even now he was not sure that the next second she would not be whisking away, out of his sight, out of his life. It is extremely likely that, had she sought to run from him just then, he would have obeyed the quick involuntary urge to capture her and bring her back. But she did not run; did not move a step forward or backward, but stood as if something of that same spell which had fallen on him had touched her as well. Her eyes, which he could watch as they watched him so intently, were unsmiling; very grave, thoughtful eyes indeed.

"Why do you call me—Titania?" she asked very softly, her voice for some reason hushed almost to a whisper.

"What else should I call you?" queried Bon Ord quickly. "You see, we've not met before this fine morning and you haven't had time yet to tell me who you are—and all about you."

"Are you sure we have never met?" she said, the gravity in her look unchanged.

"Sure?" cried Bon Ord. "Do you mean that I——"

"We might have met—somewhere; you might have forgotten——"

Bon Ord, the same Bon Ord who so recently had

averred that "no girl ever yet ever trailed her shadow" across his life, rushed into swift, emphatic denial; if he had seen her but once and that once no matter how many years ago, he would remember!

"Look at me!" she commanded, quite as though he were not already doing so to the utter exclusion of everything else on earth. "Are you sure? Sure you've never—never seen me before?"

He looked until slowly the color began to warm her cheeks and at last her own eyes fell.

"You know," he insisted laughingly, "that you're a stranger hereabouts; that you've come from a distance and only recently. There's not a man, woman, child or dog within a radius of a good many up-and-down miles that I don't know, by sight at least. You're not one of our people; not one of the mountain folk. Is there anything in the belief that Mars is inhabited?" he concluded with his flashing smile.

She did not smile back at him. Distinctly he heard her sigh. And of a sudden a wild thought sprang up in his mind and for the moment made him uncertain of all things. She was a stranger; she came secretly to this place; "queer customers" from Heaven knew where were always passing through the life of old Leather Hide! There was the man last night; there had been others; there would come still more as the years wagged on. Fugitives; Bon Ord knew them for that. Men whom the law at one place and another followed relentlessly. Men who hid out in these mountains until such time as they disappeared from even these wild haunts, spirited away by Leather Hide. But this girl! Was she, too, in hiding? Was she, like himself, a fugitive?

"Do you give me your word—of honor," she said after a slight hesitation, "that you do not know who I am?"

"Yes," he answered eagerly.

And now she did smile and in her smile, tantalizing him, there was a gleam of triumph. He would have said that she was laughing at him, having her own secret glee at his expense.

"Well, then," she said lightly, "I'm—Titania! It's a pretty name and I'll take it and thank you for it."

"But your own? I'd rather——"

"There are reasons," and her smile dazzled and ended by mystifying him, "why I'd prefer not to mention my name—my other name," she concluded quickly.

Reasons for not giving her name? He frowned. Now here, most certainly, was no business of his, yet his already awakened suspicions returned and he resented them.

"You haven't told me who you are," she reminded him, a queer and utterly undecipherable expression in her soft gray eyes. "Nor why you are here, in my hiding-place."

"I am Bon Ord. I am here because——"

"Yes?" she prompted quickly.

He bethought himself, caught himself up and pondered. In the end he made a face and laughed ruefully.

"I'm on the dodge right now," he said bluntly. "I'm wanted by certain good folk, and I prefer to range free!"

"You are Bon Ord." She nodded. "They are after you and you have come here to hide. What have you done this time, Mr. Bon Ord?"

"‘This time?’ You say that as though I had done things before, and you knew of them!"

Again she nodded; again he read that she was delighted in mystifying him.

"I hope it has been nothing any wickedder than kidnapping a poet?" she suggested.

So she knew of that? Had he, after all, met her somewhere before? He racked his brains over it; had there been any girl at any of the country dances—Pshaw! He knew better. But, her voice? Wasn't there some faint familiar echo ringing in it?

She knew who he was now—if she hadn't known all along! And the first man she met would tell her why he was in hiding. He preferred to tell her himself.

"There has happened something a good deal worse this time," he told her. "A man was killed yesterday. He——"

His news electrified her. Well, it was enough to disturb any one. But he felt that somehow this touched her personally. She started and, he thought, paled as she cried excitedly:

"Not—not Dick Delamere?"

"Yes. Dick Delamere. You have heard, then?"

She shook her head violently. He could see how deeply concerned she was.

"You hadn't heard of it?" he insisted sharply.

"No. I——"

"Then," he demanded, "how on earth did you know? How could you guess, when I said that a man was killed, that it was Dick Delamere?"

She made him no answer and obviously meant to make none. She did not even give any sign that she

had heard him. Perhaps she had not. The look in her eyes was that of one who grapples exclusively with his own baffling thoughts.

"Delamere was a friend of yours?" Bon asked her.

"No. I— I knew him a little. I am sorry——"

"Well," he said briefly, looking to see how she would take the rest of his story, "he was shot yesterday. And I'm on the run because he was in my cabin!"

"In your cabin? Oh! It will look like— They will all say you did it!"

"Of course. They'll never doubt that."

She meditated deeply, and at last said thoughtfully:

"Until the right man is found! If he ever is found——"

"You, then, don't believe I'm the man?" he queried eagerly.

"You?" How frankly her widened eyes gazed back into his. "Oh! Of course not!"

"You know something of all this! You guessed, before I told you, that it was Delamere who was killed. You know I didn't do it. *You know who did!*"

She started back from him.

"You mustn't say those things. You have no right! I don't know anything. I was just beginning to know; just beginning to have glimpses of a thousand things——"

"Who are you?" he demanded of her. "You've got to tell me."

"I can't tell you—now. I'm—just T.tania. And you must not ask me until I know more. If I ever do now!"

"Now? Now that Dick Delamere is dead, you mean?"

"I don't mean anything. I don't want to talk about it."

He shrugged. What was he to do? Did she know anything after all? Had her anticipation of the truth been merely a chance leap in the dark? In his perplexity, which was very great and which had increased all the while they talked, there was one shining fact of infinite satisfaction to him: She had not from the first held the faintest suspicion of him.

"You make a man wonder," he told her. "First of all, how you got here. Where you came from. And you don't think you came without being seen, do you? I'll bet that my father has men stationed in the woods all around the lake."

"I swam," she answered. "No one saw me. It was dark on the lake and I can swim without splashing."

So, he had trapped her there. She had not wanted any one to see her. She, too, was in hiding!

For the first time he noted how she was clad, in a chic little summery dress of a type he knew, having a sister; a pretty little creation to be had at any of the country dry-goods stores for a dollar or so, yet, if one wore it with an air, an altogether charming trifle. Ann had shown him such a garment not long ago and had announced triumphantly that she bought it at Compton and Levine's for three dollars and ninety-eight cents! This one which Titania wore was so altogether pleasing that it must have cost four dollars and fifty-seven!

The little dress and her shoes and stockings were quite dry. Of course she hadn't swum in them! What simpler than to have her wardrobe, a small wardrobe of this sort, hidden somewhere on the island, thrust into

a convenient hollow log— She had been here before; had been prepared to come again. Her hair was damp; curling wantonly with the dampness.

"What about me?" he asked abruptly. "You're not going to say that you saw me here?"

"No. I'll not tell. But what are you going to do? You can't stay here forever."

"I had planned to lie here during the day. To be on my way to-night, when it's pitch dark."

"Are you running away? Out of the country?" she asked, almost breathlessly, it struck him. As though his answer might mean a great deal to her. Was she, for her own secret reason, anxious to have him gone?

"No!" he told her bluntly. "I'm not running away. I may even give myself up—when I'm good and ready!"

What a girl she was to set a man wondering. She was looking at him timidly and timidly she made her suggestion:

"If I can help you any way, I will."

"Then," he cried, "why don't you tell me whatever you know? About poor Dick Delamere, about anything else that may have something to do——"

"No! You mustn't ask me now. I don't know anything; I tell you I was just beginning to learn. And then— Oh, it's like starting in at an open door, only to have the door slam shut in your face!"

"You won't even tell me who you are?"

"I could tell you, but—" Was she laughing at him now? For the life of him he could not be sure but, were it a matter for a wager, he would have placed his bet that she was. But why?

"I could tell you, Mr. Bon Ord, but I'm not going to.

If you really want to know, why then, it's up to you to find out. And now I am going."

"Where? You'll be seen——"

"Why are you so sure I don't want to be seen?" she asked him curiously.

"I don't know. Your coming this way; this hiding-place which you know of and which you have used before— Oh, by the way, I'm afraid I've eaten most of your little larder. If I had only known——"

"You're welcome to it all. I'll bring some more."

"When?" he asked quickly. "To-day? To-night?"

She laughed softly at him.

"Who knows? And now, good-by, Mr. Bon Ord."

She was going already. He could only call back:

"Good-by, Titania. And come again. Please come again, Titania! But wait! Dunderhead that I am, I am driving you away. You stay and I'll slip out——"

But she was gone. For a little while he could watch her finding a precarious path along the base of the cliff, with only the fringing willows between her and the lake. A flutter of the little summery dress; then she was lost to him and Bon Ord found himself experiencing a queer sort of empty feeling. One of Leather Hide's crowd of "queer customers"? She?

"Pshaw!" grunted Bon Ord.

He turned back to the spot where he had slept; he had left his tobacco drying there and was of a mood, if ever man was, for a good comfortable smoke. Also he was interested in looking about him; it is to be remembered that he had come hither in the dark of last night and had but just now awakened. And certainly, since waking, he had had no time nor desire to examine his quarters.

The place had taken on a new atmosphere for him. He felt it was her place; Titania's. A truly fairylike g Otto, come right down to it. There were mossy banks rising up on all sides, with tiny ferns and little blue flowers. There was the tin which he had disturbed last night. There was a place to sit, on a flat rock; a pool of water at its base where the fingers of the lake entering the fissure in the cliff pointed it out. She had sat there. A ring of smoke-blackened stones. She had had a fire here. Two books on a natural rock-shelf: "Lyrics from Shakespeare." "A Treatise on Precious Stones." This little volume readily opened at the section devoted to emeralds.

"H'm. That's funny," pondered Bon Ord.

And then he saw something which raised all his wonderment to a new high degree. It was but a clipping from a newspaper; a paper some five years old. Secured by rude pegs at the corners, flattened out to be caught at a glance, it held its place of honor above the books. It was a picture; a two-column cut, and he knew it well. Taken at the time of the Big West Picnic in Oregon; the picture of the man who had ridden the devil horse, Red Thunder, whom no man had ever ridden successfully before——

The picture, saved all these years and awaiting him here,—of Bon Ord!

CHAPTER VII

SIR CHARLES RANDOM, poet, aristocrat, and potential lion, would he but shake his mane and roar a bit, made himself very much at home in Bon Ord's deserted cabin. In the dusk he came in from his labors and dropped with a sigh into the first convenient chair. Here was something new, fine, too, and full of zest; but a man wanted his meals regularly and bountiful meals at that; and he could do with his share of rest at the end.

He had told Ann on leaving her father's home that he was going to look Bon up and get a job with him. But Bon had taken himself off without there being time for talking things over.

"If there wasn't a job open before, there is now," said Random after things quieted down. "I'm elected to the position. At least I can look out for his horses for him."

He had managed to make it a busy day; he had done more hard manual work than ever before in his life. Among other matters he had found Nabob running loose; back there in the mountains near the other cabin which Sheriff Ord had raided last night. And the very deuce of a time had Random had in catching him and getting him home. He stretched out his legs, ran his fingers through his hair—it did look like a mane!—and reached for his pipe.

Confound that rug; slipped again. The ugly stain on the floor seemed bent on disclosing itself. "Blood cried out until it was avenged." He seemed to have

heard something like that; had read it, maybe, when a boy and his reading was lurid. He rose to replace the rug, stood meditating a moment, and then went out. Coming back he brought with him a saw, a hammer, a chisel, and a bit of planking found in the outshed.

He sat down on the floor and went to work. Making a good deal of noise, he did not hear the knocking at the door at first; when it came again he sang out: "Come in," and looked up. When he saw who it was he jumped to his feet, somewhat hastily flipping the old rug back into place.

"Ann!" he exclaimed. "This is fine——"

"Bon's all right!" she cried happily. "He's alive."

He had called her "Ann" and she had not noticed. Certainly she had not minded. He said again:

"Ann! But that's great news. Tell me about it. Has he——" A slight cloud swept over his brightened expression. "They haven't caught him?"

"No. No one knows where he is. But we do know he is all right. They saw something floating on the lake this afternoon. It looked like a toy boat with a sail. It was a piece of wood; he had made a sort of mast for it with a piece of cloth fluttering so that it couldn't be missed. And on the wood with his knife he had carved a short message."

"Good old Bon. We might have known we'd hear from him. He'd know you and your mother would be terribly frightened for him, thinking him drowned in Wild River. What did his message say?"

"Just this: 'Alive. Also well and happy. Bon.' And I think that it wasn't sent so much for mother and me as for Dad. I wish you could have seen his face when a man brought the thing to him!"

"It's pretty hard on those two," said Random. "I know. They take it to heart, though neither's the one to let on."

"They're just the best two friends on earth, when—when it's possible!"

"What does your father think? Surely not that Bon killed that man."

"How can any one tell what he thinks? But in any case, of course, he'd want an accounting from the man in whose cabin the thing happened! The man who was found here, after it happened. Why, oh, why doesn't Bon come back? It will be his fault if people do come to believe that he did it."

He nodded.

"That's right. I tried to stop him. Well, anyway, it's good to hear from him; to know that the river among all those rocks didn't make an end of him. And, do you know, sometimes I fancy that this chap, this brother of yours, can take care of himself rather well."

"Oh, Bon's smart enough—if he wasn't such a big fool—" She tried to laugh over her own words but came dangerously close to crying.

"And here I haven't even offered you a chair. I'm sorry!" cried Random contritely, and drew a chair up for her. "You rest a minute; I'll toddle out and make some tea. Some toast, hot and brown and buttery, just the proper prescription for our morale."

"No; I mustn't. I had to ride out and tell you of the news. I knew you'd want to know."

"Well, rather," smiled Random.

She looked at him curiously.

"I don't quite know why you should take so keen an interest; why you should have so friendly a feeling for

Bon. After the way he introduced himself to you, the way he treated you that first night——”

“That’s all forgotten. No, I’m hanged if it is,” and he laughed that deep rumbling and entirely pleasant laugh of his. “I’m glad to remember it. He was a good sport about it all, you know. And, see what he did for me:” He began checking off on his fingers, looking humorously at her all the while. “He caused a great stimulation of interest in my lectures. He made it possible for me to meet your charming mother and your good father. He put something like three hundred dollars into my very empty pockets,” and he jingled the pockets in question. “On top of all—I have to thank Mr. Bon Ord that I know you, Ann.”

Under his laughter there was something very serious about the young Englishman just then. And when, at the end, he said “Ann” as he did she flushed quickly. But, affecting to ignore his concluding words, she hastened into expostulation, saying:

“You don’t mean that you still carry all that money around with you? After what has just happened out here? You, alone at Bon’s cabin— Oh, you should have deposited it in the bank at Indian Rock.”

“I fancy it’s all right where it is,” he assured her coolly. “And I felt that— Oh, well, the forests are not full of hold-up men.”

Surely there are times when a thought formulated for words and abruptly held back from being spoken leaps the chasm, spans the gap of silence and is sped straight from him who harbors it to the one who listens. Ann was sure that she had caught his unspoken thought; he kept the money in his pockets because——

“Because you think that Bon may come here? That

he may need money? And you would share with him to the last penny!"

Once or twice since this clean-cut young fellow had come into her life she had experienced the sensation of coloring hotly under a word or at a look from him. Now, if there was any satisfaction in retaliation, she had hers in seeing him redden to the roots of his hair.

"Nonsense——"

"I know better!" said Ann insistently. "But I don't understand. You are putting yourself out for Bon right now, taking care of his place——"

"In need of a job," smiled Random, "I've taken advantage of his absence to make myself one!"

"No. It isn't that. You are taking up his fight for him, and I can't understand it. After all, you are a stranger to us and——"

"I'm no such thing. No; I won't have it. I'm a friend of the family. As for my interest——"

They heard steps outside, coming rapidly around the house, and turned expectantly toward the door. While it was opening both fully expected to see Bon Ord himself come in. No great reason for any such expectation, perhaps; still Bon was at the top of their thoughts and, after all, it would be quite like him.

But it was Bon's father, the sheriff. He stood a moment looking in on them curiously; then his brows rose slowly, his eyes grew very stern and he said shortly but meaningly:

"Ann? I am surprised to find you here."

She reddened, understanding all that lay under his words. For his eyes as he finished, sterner than ever, were on her companion. Random stepped forward quickly; it was as though involuntarily he were placing himself between father and daughter.

"She has but just come, sheriff," he said earnestly, "to tell me that——"

"I was not speaking to you, Random," snapped Ord sharply. "Ann, what are you doing here?"

Ann's head was held high; a flash of defiance was in her eyes.

"I quite naturally remembered to bring word of Bon's safety to so good a friend of Bon's," she said coolly.

"So good a friend—of Bon's!" The sheriff grunted. "You can always find a messenger, you know. I had hardly thought that you——"

He was about to say: "That you would be as silly over a fool with an empty title as your mother!" But only a spurt of irritation could have prompted such an utterance from John Ord and a habitual guard set upon his speech stopped him. And for the second time Ann, keen of perception and quick of intuition, caught his meaning.

"I thought it best to come myself," she said quietly. "And I am glad I did."

Her father inclined his head gravely. It was her affair if she chose to make it so. He turned to Random.

"In my son's enforced absence you would appear to have made yourself pretty much at home here," he said brusquely.

"I am afraid that I have," returned Random smilingly. "I knew it would be all right with Bon. Besides, his stock wants attending to and I have elected myself to the job."

He had spoken not above a dozen words when the sheriff, tipping his head aside as a man does who listens

to some faint or distant sound, showed plainly that he was no longer interested in what Random might have to say on this or any other subject. It grew very still in the cabin. Then a far-off thud of hoofs was heard; some one came who rode hard. At every instant the hoofs drummed louder. Here was some one arriving in hot haste.

"Bon Ord?"

The words were not spoken, yet surely the three who heard the hoofbeats asked, each of himself, if this were not Bon Ord coming back. It would be like him, ever reckless; to come with a rush, ignoring all risks, taking his chances headlong. Ann and Random looked at each other, then to the open door, awaiting breathlessly.

"If it should be Bon," Random began thinking of a sudden, "I should warn him that his father is here!"

The rider, racing his horse, came rushing on and, even with the shadows thickening and dusk filling the air, they saw that it was not the man whom they all half expected. And Random understood immediately that this man, though a stranger to him, was well known to both the sheriff and his daughter.

The newcomer dismounted, swinging lightly down from the saddle, and Random was set marvelling. Here was one who rode like some wild boy, who flung himself to earth like a boy—and who was an old man. Very old, very spare, very tall, he stood in the open doorway glaring about him. From under the brim of his old flapping hat escaped a cascade of curling white hair, white but ivory tinted, like very old paper, like piano keys yellowing with age. His beard was his pride; for there are those old men who, perhaps with reason, take pride in their beards. It was very long,

so long in fact that he generally wore it tucked in at his neck, and it was a habit with him, as Random was soon to see, to begin pulling at it when he let his emotions master him—he believed in giving emotions a free rein, too!—and to end by bringing the entire amazing length of it into the open. His face, what was to be seen of it, was hawk-like, thin, eager, and dominated by a pair of blazing, steel-blue eyes.

“Grandfather!” exclaimed Ann.

He glared at her, grunted as though he was disgusted with what he saw and did not in the least mind who knew it, and transferred that penetrating gaze of the gimletting eyes to the others. At Random he glared as at her and with the same sort of resultant expression. On his restless gaze sped until it trafficked with the sheriff’s.

“Hmf!” he snorted.

Thus he placed himself on record as **being** disgusted with them all.

“What are you here for?” he burst out suddenly. “You three ninnies, what do you want here?”

With that he began tugging at his beard. It looked to be six inches long, being doubled back on itself, when he began; and under Random’s astonished eyes seemed to grow inch by inch.

Ann had added nothing to her single ejaculation of: “Grandfather!” From the sheriff came never a single word. He came forward, his stern face turned neither to right nor left, to pass through the door, to thrust by the figure standing in it.

“You—you—you big stiff!” cried the old man angrily, “you just leave my boy alone, y’understand? Oh, I got your number, you little struttin’ turkey-cock with your little tin star! Sore, that’s what you are;

and jealous, that's what. All because you know it's never a single acre of my land or a single dollar of my money that'll ever drift into your pilferin' paws. Bon, he's my boy; don't believe you're his dad anyhow!"

He began cackling viciously at that, spitting out his shrill series of "Hee, hee, hee!" with such relish and such malice that it was positively startling. The sheriff, paying him the same heed that a mastiff bestows upon an insignificant puppy, shouldered by him and passed outside.

"I know what you're up to, you three," the old man shrilled after him. "It's a trap——"

He broke off, took a long breath and then lifted his voice to shout out at the top of his lungs, a voice that was sharp, discordant, terrifying with the spirit he put into it; a rough, cracked, ear-splitting yell:

"Hey, Bon Boy! Hey! If you're anywheres in hearin'—go slow! It's a trap! A trap, I tell you, Old Kid! Keep under kivver, Bon Boy!"

From Sheriff John Ord, a man who had the trick of mastering his own temper under most circumstances, came back a mutter that bespoke a towering rage; no other man on earth could anger him as did this old man. But he made no other reply; going to his horse, mounting savagely, he was off at a gallop. And after him followed that shrill peering cackle of a man who delighted to torment him.

"Gone," he grunted, turning his steely glittering eyes upon the two who remained. "He better go. He generally does when I'm about. I ain't afeared of him and his tin star and I guess he knows it. He's a low-lived mangy pup, that's what that little Johnny Ord is. Ever'body knows it, too; if they didn't, I'd tell 'em!"

Ann cast a desperate look at Random, then sought

to pass out of the door. But her grandfather blocked the way.

"No, you don't!" he snapped at her. "Not 'til I'm through with you, you ain't. I want to know what you're doin' here?"

"I came," said Ann quietly, "to bring this gentleman the news of Bon; that he was all right——"

"All right? All right? You silly chit-chat-chicken, of course he's all right! He's always all right. Why not?"

Inch by inch the beard appeared to grow. For the life of him Random couldn't keep his fascinated eyes off it.

"*This gentleman?*" rasped the old man. "Who's he, I'm askin' you? Some dirty spy, mos' likely? Some city gumshoe, sneakin' dee-tective——"

"Grandfather!—This is a friend of ours, a true friend to Bon. Sir Charles Random, my grandfather, Mr. Merriweather——"

The old man stiffened, his eyes flew wide open.

"Hmf," he said. "T' 'ell, you say," he added. And then proffered a hand like some gigantic eagle's claw. "Put 'er here, old boy," he invited. "You're all right. I know, 'cause Bon, he told me. Shake. It'll do you good once in a while to shake with a real man."

Random accepted the invitation and felt the talon lock about his own hand in a mighty and cordial grasp.

"Mr. Merriweather——" he began, groping for words as to discover himself where they might lead him. He scarcely knew how to take this vitriolic old fellow. But he did not get beyond the two words.

"Mr. Merriweather, your foot!" exploded the owner of the name. "Call me Bill."

Random turned a curious look toward Ann. He didn't know if he should laugh; if he had to do with a ramshackle, roystering old lunatic. Ann's eyes were suddenly bright with laughter.

"A poet they say you are, my boy," ran on the old man. "Well, they're a pack of dirty liars and, havin' looked at you—and felt your grip!—I'll tell 'em so. Always and always folks is jumpin' over one another to say insultin' things about a stranger. And they go stick a title to you like a tail, do they? Well, you can't help that, neither; guess you was born to it, huh? And used to it? Between friends, that makes no nevermind. You're Random to me and I'm Bill to you. Shake again!"

They shook again. Random was somewhat surprised at himself for the warmth that managed to squeeze itself into the hand clasp.

"And now, boys and girls," said old Bill Merriweather, "let's all have a drink together! Liquor sets friendship like water on cement. There's mos' likely apt to be a bottle of Bon Boy's best stickin' around. There she be, the brown beauty! See her old naik stickin' up on the top shelf yonder? Here's a go. To friendship. Most of all—to my gran'son!"

Having invited the others to drink with him, no doubt he felt his duty done and all the social amenities operating smoothly, for when it came to carrying out his own suggestion he ignored them utterly. His long arm reached out, his lean leathery fingers crooked about the bottle which he lifted to the light of the open door, squinting at it, gauging its content; up went the bottle neck to his mouth. There was but little liquor when he began—enough for three or four potations for an

ordinary man—and not a drop left when he put the bottle down. He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand.

"Prime licker, ain't it?" challenged old Bill. "'Course it is; you won't ever find anything imitation about Bon or his belongings!—I tell you what, Random; these folks in this neck o' the woods make a man sick. Look at all the fuss they're stirrin' up over nothin' a-tall. If Bon had a mind to kill that yeller dog Delamere, he knew what he was doin'——"

"Bon did not kill him!" cried Ann hotly. "Grandfather, how can you say a thing like that?"

The old man stared at her wonderingly.

"Hey?" he said. "Bon didn't kill him? Then what's all the racket about? What I heard was——"

"The man was killed here, in Bon's cabin. And of course Bon had nothing to do with it. But——"

"Then what in blazes is he on the dodge for?" cackled the old man irritably. "If he didn't do the shootin', why don't he tell 'em so? All he's got to do is say he didn't plug him!"

"But appearances, what they call circumstantial evidence——"

"Your foot!" he snapped back at her. "What's evidence and such trumped-up stuff got to do with anything as against Bon Boy's word? Name him a liar, would you? Name your own brother a liar? You're a silly chit-chat-chicken!"

She looked helplessly toward Random.

"I must be going now."

"I'll ride with you," offered Random.

"I'm goin' myself," said the old man. "You leave Annie go alone, Random. You see, old boy, there's

just the two of us, you and me, to see the boy through, his own folks turnin' against him like a nest of rattlesnakes. I'm hammerin' the trail back to my place; Bon's like to make a bee line for me; we're pardners, you know, and where'll a man turn, come trouble, but to his own pardner? 'Less, you'll say, he might drift back to his own place? That's why you stick here, to be ready if he blows in."

He clapped his new friend familiarly on the back and went out. Random saw him and Ann mounted, watched them ride off, Ann toward Indian Rock and old Merriweather heading back into the mountains. Then he went into the cabin, lighted a lamp and sat down to reflect over his pipe.

Bon might, even now, be finding his way to the old man's ranch; there was small likelihood, thought Random, of his coming back here to his own cabin; he'd know there was danger in returning where they would be looking for him.—Yet that was a step now in the adjoining room, coming on swiftly; a step that sounded for all the world like Bon Ord's! Random sprang to his feet. And there confronting him, smiling, unruffled and unconcerned, stood young Ord himself.

"Bon! For the love of Heaven——"

"Sh! Coast clear?"

"So far as I know. But——"

"I heard old King Canute yell——"

"Heard whom? Heard what?"

"Old King Canute." Bon chuckled. "Meaning Bill Merriweather, if you know him by that name. My mamma's papa," he grinned, "and some old-timer, too! 'Trap' is what he yelled; so I waited a bit."

"Well, I'm glad you're here," said Random warmly.

"There's no sense in the attitude you started off with. You'll give yourself up now and——"

"Not on your life! Not yet, I won't. I'm making you just a flying call."

"But unless you do plan to surrender—it's madness, man!"

"Nothing of the sort. I had to come back. First off, my hat's gone. Lost in Wild River——"

"Your hat, man!"

"Wouldn't have me get all sunburned, would you?" Bon grinned at him. He crossed the room and took down an old, dilapidated hat from a peg. "That's one thing. Another is, I'm getting leg-weary; never walked so much in my life before! Boots hurt."

He pulled another pair out from under the couch and got them on.

"So I needed a horse. I've got Nabob saddled and waiting outside now. I'll be on my way in a minute. But there's the one other thing. Watch me!"

He went to the fireplace and raked among the heap of ashes. Having cleared a space he lifted out a stone and groped in the cavity which was revealed. Presently he turned back to Random, having replaced the stone and covered it with ashes, and revealed what he held.

"Bank-notes!" gasped Random. "Looks like a fortune." And then, as it flashed on him that Bon could have had but one need urgent enough to bring him back here for them, he cried in expostulation: "No, Bon; don't do it! You are losing your head. You are planning to leave the country?"

Bon, thrusting the bank-notes into his pocket, laughed.

"I've got a roll here fat enough to carry me a long way, old top," he said carelessly. "Nine thousand dollars—cash money. But keep your hair on; it's not to travel on. I've had it on tap here of late for a certain particular thing. Between you and me, mind you, I'm buying land to-night. I'm on my way to old Leather Hide's. He'll be expecting me.—So will some others——"

Random could not understand the man.

"To be thinking of buying land when there's that other thing——"

"Yes, I'm thinking of that other thing, too," said Bon coolly. "Most of all I'm thinking of that other thing."

"You mean——"

"I mean that the man who did for poor Dick was in the cabin up in the woods last night when Dad raided it and I took my high dive. I mean that same man is going to be at Leather Hide's to-night, unless I miss my guess; and he's going to figure on me showing up; and he's going to tell himself I'll have about nine thousand bucks in my jeans; and——"

"Listen!" whispered Random, very tense all of a sudden. "I think I hear something outside."

Bon nodded.

"I'm on my way," he whispered back. "Off to Leather Hide's. And if any one wants to bet you can bet 'em ten to one there's going to be something stirring to-night. So long, old-timer."

He stepped swiftly to the table, blew out the light and for a moment it was very silent in the dark cabin. Random heard a board creak presently; never another sound. But he knew that Bon was gone.

CHAPTER VIII

"If you don't mind my saying so, Mr. Hyde, all by way of passing the time and being polite, so to speak, likewise—as I say, if you don't mind my remarking on it, not wishing to be personal or anything of that sort, then I'd say that's a remarkable fine specimen you're wearing on your finger, Mr. Hyde."

It was the man who called himself Fancher speaking; Amos Fancher. The man whom Bon Ord had found here last night at Leather Hide's place; the puffy individual with the gross jowls and too-close eyes and furtive look. He was all affability now as he addressed his host, in the same room where Ord had seen him, in almost the same attitude. Perhaps he had sat there ever since; certainly there were many more rings intertangled into new patterns where his glass had rested on the table.

"You're a long-winded chap, if ever I listened to one, Fancher," said Leather Hide. "I'll leave it to the other boys; what say, Vickers? What say, Brady?"

With pipe stem gripped in his teeth, his old tobacco box open in his hands, he kept his eyes bent curiously on Fancher.

Brady laughed and nodded that he agreed. Ralph Vickers, where he sat with his chair tilted back against the wall, his boot heels supporting the raised front legs, his hat tipped forward over his cruel eyes, neither laughed nor nodded. He watched and he listened; and since the conversation until and including the latest

observation seemed to be anything but important, his extremely intent attitude was noteworthy. Nor did it pass unnoted; not that any one of his three companions was paying any particular attention to him to-night, so silent and unobtrusive was he. But in the room directly across the hall, sitting quietly in the dark, "Leather Hide's girl" was listening; and from where she sat she could see Vickers.

"I like to be polite," said Fancher. "I was raised that way and I'm used to it. It don't hurt a man none, neither; being polite. I belong to the Brotherhood of Man; I'm like a dove when it comes to peaceful talk and peaceful ways. I'm friendly by nature. You can take it from me, it don't make a man any less manly because he's gentle in his ways."

Leather Hide guffawed.

"You're slick, you mean, Fancher," he jibed him. "Slick as grease." He winked openly at Brady, having given Vickers up by now as half asleep. "And yet, slick as you are, you got to come up to see old man Hyde! You slick birds overdo it sometimes, huh? Your surplus grease just oils the skids and down you shoot straight into the pen, too—if old man Hyde don't happen to be ready to lend a hand."

A windy sigh escaped Fancher, seeming to have labored its way up through mountains of fatty tissue; an oily sigh.

"I was speaking of that jewel on your finger, Mr. Hyde. Now, it's a regular beaut, I say."

Leather Hide, with his hand on the table oscillating just the least bit in the world to set the emerald lights flickering as the lamplight struck his ring, appeared to agree. Yes, a rarely beautiful stone.

"Not so bad," he admitted.

Now here was a strange thing: when he spoke of his emerald the look in his eyes changed; the tone and quality of his voice changed. Hot, restless, feverish eyes softened if ever so fleetingly; a voice that was naturally harsh, strident even, softened. A strange thing. One would have said that this man with the long red neck, the small head, the air of the foulest of the citizens of the air, did have a heart instead of a stone in his breast, after all; and that he did know how to love as well as hate; and that all of the only sort of love which he was capable of understanding flowed in a steady stream into the lambent light of an emerald. A man may love a horse or a dog. Here was one who loved emeralds. As he gazed down at his open hand, all that showed in his eyes.—Vickers was watching him.

"And," resumed Fancher, busy as usual at his favorite task of creating and examining circles—he was something of a circle himself, one came to discover, in his way of arriving anywhere quite as much in another, more tangible, and more obvious particular—"And," said Fancher the second time, "not meaning to be personal, like I said before, but saying something that's meant as a compliment and is a compliment, I do believe you know emeralds, Mr. Hyde!"

As quick as lightning the softness fled from Leather Hide's eyes and voice together.

"What are you driving at?" he blazed out.

"Me?" said Fancher innocently. "Nothing. I'll bet that's so, though. You know 'em, don't you now, Mr. Hyde?"

Hyde, after staring after him fruitlessly, for Fan-

cher's head was down again, his busy glass twisting, answered him with a short laugh. Once more the flabby man's great body quivered to the expulsion of a tremulous sigh.

"Of course you know 'em; you'd tell in a minute the difference between a first water and a bit of paste, wouldn't you? Take me now; I don't know beans about such things. I'd like to; I don't mean it's beneath me or anything; it's just that I ain't had the chance. I don't own any; wish I did—I'd like to have my share——"

Not a man in the room who heard could have told to save his life if Fancher was meaning by his circuitous route to arrive anywhere or was merely meandering after a fashion with no earthly objective. But at least two, Vickers and Leather Hide himself, gave him a very marked, even a profound attention. And when he stopped where he did, giving them to understand that where his words ceased, his thought ran on, he must have felt that they were waiting for him to go on. He did not lift his head to look at either.

"Funny thing about that guy, Delamere, getting croaked, ain't it?" he said absently. "Wonder who popped him off? And why?"

"Are you driving at something—or just a plain jack-ass idiot?" Leather Hide roared out at him. "What's Delamere got to do with——"

"With what? Emeralds? I didn't say he had anything to do with 'em. You see, gentlemen," and Mr. Fancher smiled fatly, "I'm a funny nut, I guess. I don't exercise my bulk much; you'd guess that, seeing how I'm pretty heavy on my feet. But my mind!—

boys, it races! It runs away like a racehorse gone wild. I'm all the time thinking things. I'm psychological. Maybe you boys, living up here in the hills, don't get me when I use a big word like that? Well, I'll explain: You see, my mind goes off like a dog after a rabbit. Now, there's a nice homely figger of speech you will get the meaning of. Well, let's say, a dog hotfoots after his rabbit. And then, let's say another rabbit, one he hadn't even seen before, jumps up and dashes across the first rabbit's trail and almost under his nose. What does Mr. Dog do? Why, you know; he goes after rabbit number two."

Again that innocent smile, as though at last he had led them to the clear and triumphant truth. Leather Hide groaned. Fancher resumed:

"Where is this here Rabbit Number Two, you boys are asking?" His smile fattened. "Here's the way my processes went, me thinking: if I had time I could tell these boys a story; I'm good at spilling a yarn, if I do say so myself. But I don't like to be interrupted. What's to break in? Why, you told me already you're looking for company; a certain guy, name of Bonord, is coming to buy some land—or maybe he ain't coming—because he's on the dodge, suspected of croaking another man, name of Delamere; and did this here Bonord guy do the croaking or didn't he? That's what I'm thinking and I ask you about it."

"Oh, hell!" exploded Leather Hide.

"The story I was going to tell," said Fancher, "is a good one, too. About a young widow woman. Happened a dozen years ago; maybe a bit longer. San Francisco woman, she was. I didn't know her myself, you see; I know a chap that knew her well, though.

He told me. She went in for emeralds. Had a little kid, too; girl it was. With a funny name; easy to remember, seeing it is such a funny name: Tintania——”

Again he paused as though to elaborate his patterns; perhaps also to indulge in certain intricate mental patterns. Leather Hide's hand had closed slowly, as though choking something; it was now an ugly looking fist. The look in his eyes was not to be read.

Fancher yawned and patted his open mouth with a pudgy hand.

“It's a long yarn, though, and I guess I better save it. I hate to be stopped before I'm done with a good story; spoils it, don't it? And,” with his innocent glance around, “I guess maybe none of you boys but Mr. Hyde would be much interested in it any way—seeing it's about emeralds.”

“Go ahead; let's have it,” said Vickers. It was the first time he had spoken for an hour.

Fancher looked pleased.

“You're like me, Mr. Vickers,” he said as though complimenting Mr. Vickers very highly indeed. “You like a good yarn; you're what I call a good listener.—First off, though, to give you gents an idea of what I think of what I'm going to tell you, and how important I know it to be and not to be entirely lost to the world, well, here's what I did. Before I ever started out into the woods, this being a pretty wild country as I've heard and me being a city man and such never knowing what dangers he might run into—why, I've knowed two—three city men in my time that went out into the mountains, maybe camping and fishing, you know, and had things happen to 'em. There was

Snuggy Bates; lost. Dying when they found him. That was back in the nineties. There was Frenchy Duffels; know what that poor boy did? Stepped into a trap; steel trap; big bear trap they said it was. Caught him by the leg. He couldn't get out. Poor old Frenchy Duffels. Nice man he was, too.

"Well, me, stepping out into the unknown, which frankly, boys, these wild woods places are to me, I sit up all night the night before starting, and what do you figger I'm doing? Why, like a soldier going into battle, I sit down and write a good long letter. Who to?" He chuckled oilily. "Why, to my best pal, and that's me! Yes sir; a good long letter to me, and mailed it, too; addressing Mr. Amos Fancher, Esq., in care of a certain friend of mine in the city. Now, you see," he exclaimed in soft triumph, "see what is accomplished! If anything happens to me, why there's that letter. And on a certain date it'll be opened and—there you are!"

Mike Brady laughed; the fat man amused him. Both Leather Hide and Vickers were still, watchful, keenly attentive.

"There, I've run down Rabbit Number Two for you," said Mr. Fancher affably. "You've got what they call an insight on how my mind works. Oh, I'm a pretty deep one; I've got to say that for myself."

Just here the dogs set up a sudden barking out in front of the house.

"There comes your man now," said Fancher. "Well, my story will keep; it's kept without spoiling a long while already. I'll tell you about it—Mr. Hyde—later on. You've got business on now. I do hope—yes, I sure do hope, you do a good bit of business to-night—and get the money paid down, too."

"What's it to you, my friend?" said Leather Hide coldly.

The thick round shoulders quivered upward into a shrug. No further reply did Mr. Fancher make; his eyes had trailed away to the door as though he were merely idly curious to see the visitor whom the dogs had announced.

A door was heard to open; swift steps came along a hallway; Bon Ord looked in on them. Mike Brady was on his feet, yawning and stretching.

"Hello, Bon," said Leather Hide. "Come along in."

"I'm on my way," said Mike, reaching for his hat. "You boys will want to talk business anyhow. So long, boys; so long, Bon."

Vickers rose with him.

"Me, too," he said. "'Night, gents."

Bon had not spoken. Now he made an incompleted gesture; perhaps he was about to suggest—perhaps to insist—that these two remain until his business with Leather Hide was done. If so he thought better of it; remaining silent he stepped into the room, standing in seeming carelessness with his back to the wall, and allowed Vickers and Brady to pass out into the semi-darkness of the hall. He remained motionless and silent until their heavy treads carried them to the back door; the door opened and closed and then Bon spoke quickly.

"Ready for business, Hyde?" he demanded.

"Of course, I am. How about you? Got it with you?"

Bon tossed a folded paper to the table.

"Sign that," he said curtly. "Run your eye over it, put your John Hancock to it, and I'll hand you your money."

"Cash?" said Leather Hide.

Bon nodded. He had stepped back so that the wall was close behind him. His thumb was hooked into his belt; there would have been less significance in this had it not brought his hand so close to his sagging holster.

Leather Hide began reading.

"Speed it up," snapped young Ord. "You know what's in it. I've had it ready for you for six years! All you've got to do is make out that it refers to the right piece of land, then date it and sign it."

"In a rush, Bon?" asked Hyde casually.

"Yes."

Leather Hide assured himself that there was nothing wrong with the paper; then lifted his voice to shout:

"Tanny! Oh, Tanny!"

There came no reply from the girl remaining so quiet in the dark room across the dim hallway.

"What do you want your girl for?" demanded Bon.

"I want some ink. Confound the girl; always underfoot when I don't want her and the devil knows where when I do. Chasing around out somewhere in the night," grumbled Leather Hide.

"There's some ink in the table drawer, Mr. Hyde," said Fancher.

Leather Hide grunted. He pulled out the drawer and found ink and a couple of rusty pens.

"You know a lot of a man's affairs, for a stranger," he muttered.

"Sure do," acknowledged Fancher brightly. "I'm a noticing party, I am."

Hyde affixed his signature, then began waving the paper to dry the ink.

"Let's see the cash," he suggested.

Bon came forward, handed over a roll of bank-notes and recovered and pocketed the paper.

"Like Brady and Vickers, guess I'll be on my way," he said. "It's all there, Leather Hide."

"Yes," returned the other, having counted carefully. "It's all here. The land's yours now, Bon." He stood up. "If you're in a rush I won't keep you. I'll go as far as the door with you."

"Thanks. But I'd rather go alone."

"Rats. It won't hurt me to go to the door with you and light you out——"

"You'll stay just where you are, old boy," said Bon sternly. "Remember that. I happen to mean it!"

He stepped swiftly out of the room, closing the door after him. It was pitch dark in the hall now. For a moment he hesitated; Vickers and Brady had gone out at the back——

He heard the faintest of sounds, close at hand; some one moved softly. His hand tightened about the butt of his revolver, drawing it out of the loose holster. They'd spring something on him; he felt it in his bones. He had come looking for it——

"Sh!" came a whisper at his side. "This way. Quick!"

He thrust out his hand, the left, and it came to rest on the shoulder of—Leather Hide's girl!

"They're waiting for you, Vickers and Brady, outside," came the guarded but excited whisper again. "Quick; this way."

Her hand tugged at his sleeve. He was of two minds: to shake it off and go on his way; to obey that urgent command. She tugged harder, more insistently. And, with his mind made up, he followed her.

She led him straight into the room where she had been waiting. He heard the door close very softly after them.

"There is another way out," she was whispering. "They won't expect you to know it. Keep close to me and don't make a sound!"

He kept close by, holding her hand tight in his; her right hand in his left. His own right was otherwise occupied; he might follow into the dark a cautious step or so, but he did not trust blindly.

"There are secret steps down to a cellar—there's a tunnel that goes a long way—it comes out at the spring-house down by the creek—You came on foot?"

"Of course not!"

"Where's your horse?"

"Tied in the woods, couple of hundred yards——"

"That's good. From the spring-house you can go up the creek. Now, hurry!"

He began to believe in her! A whisper is the hardest of all sounds to gauge, yet he fancied this one uttered in downright honesty of purpose.

"Go ahead," he returned grimly. "I don't understand why you—But go ahead. I'm with you."

She had done something; opened a door or lifted a trap; he couldn't tell. But a moment later they were going down a steep, narrow stairway. A dozen steps led to the floor below.

"To the left now. Then straight ahead. There's a door——"

He had withdrawn his left hand from hers and, obeying a sudden impulse, found and struck a match. In a cellar such as Leather Hide would have, a man might strike a match without fear of its little light being seen.

"There," she whispered. "You'll see the door now?"

But just then he wasn't looking for any door. Driven by that same impulse he lifted the match, holding it out—bent upon seeing the face of Leather Hide's girl. She was close to his side——

As though he had lifted a hand to strike her she recoiled, back and back from him. Her own hands flew up, as though to protect herself from a blow—Or only to shield her face from his searching eyes? The shadow of her hands was across her eyes.

CHAPTER IX

THE light of the match, short-lived and uncertain as it was, revealed to Bon Ord the more salient of the details about him. This was a small, square room, dirt-floored, with walls of earth on three sides, the fourth being timbered and boarded up. There were a number of sturdy cases; this cellar probably housed several thousand dollars' worth of high-grade liquors. In a corner was a cot with dirty, tumbled blankets. A place, this, for the concealment not only of illicit merchandise; one of Leather Hide's "queer customers" might lie snugly hidden here in times of necessity.

So much had he seen before the match burned down; even the indicated low door in the timbered wall. Yet what he had sought most of all was denied him; a glimpse of the girl's face. For it was Bon Ord's thought that if circumstance forced a man to trust one of whom he knew very, very little, it would be of considerable interest and might be of even greater advantage, to see what expression lurked in that individual's eyes. He had hoped to surprise her, but her gesture had been as swift as his own. Her face was in shadow; he could read nothing there. Leather Hide's girl in her ragged dress; that was all the match showed him.

Plunged again into the pitch-black darkness, he stood frowning, for the moment uncertain. Was her act purely involuntary, raising her hand to shield her eyes against a sudden glare? Or a gesture prompted by

guilt? If this were some trick of hers, if she were leading him to play into the hands of Leather Hide's crowd— He'd force her along with him a step or two! There'd be no running back to set them on him in some cursed trap. He put out his hand to recapture hers, and was surprised that it met hers in the darkness and that hers seemed to be questing his. About to speak, to advise her of his grim determination that she was not so soon done with him, he was stopped by her whisper:

"We must hurry!"

"We?"

"Yes.—They don't know I am in the house. When they called, I didn't answer. So now, I, too must get out! Oh, if they found me inside—when they found out how you got away, they'd know I helped you and— He'd kill me!"

"Who?" he demanded sharply.

"Hurry! Oh, hurry!"

He had had to judge before from a whisper; so now again. And in spite of his suspicions that whisper sounded honest. And her hand lay warm and tight in his; for the life of him, while they stood linked thus he could not but believe in her.

"Let's go," he retorted briefly.

It was but a few steps to the low door. The girl had it open in an instant. He felt the damp, heavy air of the place in his face as they passed through.

"I'll go ahead," she offered. "I know the place. Be careful; you'll have to stoop." She pressed by him, calling back softly: "You can light another match, if you want to. It's a tunnel——"

He struck his second match. It burned with diffi-

culty and shed but a dim, sickly light. No room to stand erect; he must bend almost double. Piles of dirt lay here and there on the uneven floor, siftings from above. Overhead were timbers that seemed rotting, sagging, ready at any moment to yield to the pressure above and come crashing down. Ahead of him, hurrying along deeper into the shadows, went Leather Hide's girl. He hastened after her.

"She's on the level. Of course she's on the level——"

Faintly he could hear her flying footfalls. How far ahead was she? She could come to the spring-house first; the spring-house was only some fifty yards away. She could slip out first; be gone when he got there. He tried to run, to catch up with her. He stumbled over a heap of loose soil, pitched forward; all but fell. He caught himself up with a jerk; behind him he could hear fresh soil sifting down. The place was not without its horrors; horrors thrive and multiply in such dark, underground, secret passageways. No fresh, open air, no gleam of light; no free, wandering wind in a man's face and no starlight in his eyes. A place of suffocation, mentally and physically.

He pulled himself together and went on, making haste slowly. His head struck against a beam which, rotted and loosened at one end, hung down slanting across the tunnel. He heard a rush of descending debris, felt it pour down upon him. Briefly he was granted the sensation of being buried alive. Then suddenly he came up with her. Again his hand was met by hers.

"There's another door here," she said almost in his ear as they crouched close together. "It opens into

the spring-house; it slides to one side so that inside the spring-house it looks just like the rest of the wall. It's hard to move; help me with it."

She guided his fingers; he found a handhold and, tugging with all his might, slid the stubborn door back. They stepped into the spring-house, the tunnel's end.

"If you will close the door again, they may never guess that we came this way at all."

He closed it at last, then whispered:

"Now, the other door, the one leading out of this infernal place; the last door, glory be!"

"This way," she whispered back to him. She was on the opposite side of the room, but only two or three steps away, so restricted was the place. "We'll open it quietly; slip out quietly. They mustn't hear us! I think they will be close to the house but——"

"I'll take my chances with them outside," he muttered, grown more and more impatient to be out in the open where a man had room, where he could breathe freely. "You just lie low if they start anything; I'll lead 'em off and you'll have your chance. There's just the two, I guess; Vickers and Mike."

"There are two more of the men," she warned him. "Marco and Tony. They've been waiting outside."

"You don't happen to know just what their game is, do you?" he asked sharply.

"No. But I'm beginning—lately—to guess at so many things! I think—Oh, I'm not sure of anything!—that they mean to tie you up—leave you here and send for the sheriff to come and get you——"

"They could have tried that as I came!"

"But the money you brought?"

"Why not then? If it had been necessary. But since I left it with Leather Hide——"

"As you came, how could they be *sure* you had it? Now—I am just guessing from—from little things I've heard or have guessed at before!—they have the money. And you have some sort of a paper—a receipt. If they could get that back—and leave you tied—and——"

He felt that there was more which she knew, or guessed or suspected; and that she hesitated to go on. He urged her, saying:

"Tell me! There is something else."

"We must hurry!"

"Yes, that's true enough. But it takes no great time to speak a few words. To rob me of both the money and the paper; to hog-tie me and send for my father—*What else?*"

"Some one killed Dick Delamere. Who? Which one of them?" she said breathlessly.

"You don't think that I did it?"

"Of course I don't. Didn't you tell—Oh, I know that you didn't. And I think that the man who did—thought that it was you he was shooting!"

Bon grew rigid. Delamere had been in his cabin—some one had shot from behind——

"Who would do that?" he demanded.

"Who?" she repeated after him. "And why? Was it some one who, thinking Delamere was you, thought that you had on you this same money that has changed hands to-night? But, come. Hurry——"

She had given him something to think upon. And, on top of all the rest, what in the world was Delamere doing at his cabin?

"First," said Bon, grown stubborn, "what was the other thing that you were going to say? When they had left me here, robbed and tied——"

"Whoever it was that killed Dick Delamere stopped long enough to take certain things from his pockets; oh, I don't know what; his watch, a knife, maybe. Those things—I think that when the sheriff found you here, he'd find them in your pockets!"

In spite of a cool, reckless spirit Bon Ord felt a shiver run up and down his back.

"Yes, we'd better step along," he grunted angrily. "Where's the door?"

"You can strike a match; the walls are stone and the door is of heavy planks; no light will show."

He obeyed. Again her hand shielded her eyes. Accident? He frowned. But he needed his wits about him for other matters. A glance showed him all that the spring-house contained; shelves with butter, eggs, ham, and bacon; rows of tinned goods. And, almost at his elbow, the heavy plank door. He blew out the match.

"Ready?" he whispered.

"Go out quietly," she urged. "They may be anywhere; by now they may even look for us here. But I don't think so. You can go up along the creek——"

"And you?"

"I'll follow you out in a minute. But I'll go the other way."

And now, planning to leave her, it dawned on him that throughout he had shown anything but gratitude to her. If all this that she had told him was the truth—and he believed implicitly that it was—he owed her a pretty great deal. A devilish situation they would have sought to put him in; one that would have taken a lot of explaining!

"I haven't thanked you—I do——"

"Sh! And hurry. Oh, please hurry."

"Good enough," he said shortly. "You've been a brick, that's all. Here goes."

She waited impatiently for him to get the door open. It seemed a needlessly long time yielding to him. Presently he whispered to her:

"It doesn't give. I'm wondering——"

"Let me! You don't know how; it catches a little."

He yielded his place to her, only saying:

"I began to think it was locked."

"No. No; I unlocked it a little while ago, to be ready——"

In his turn now it seemed that this little task of opening a door consumed an unnecessary amount of time.

"Here; let me——"

A gasp of horror broke from her.

"Some one has locked us in! There's a big padlock outside—it's locked!"

CHAPTER X

BON ORD was not the only man in the world who, though he had heard the old adage commanding one to look before he leaped, was given constitutionally to leap first and do his thinking about it afterward. Therefore his days, though many affirmed little wisdom regulated them, were pretty zestful days. He went helter-skelter and he plunged headlong; in his time he had raced along into many a cul-de-sac and had to swing about and make his way out the best way he could. But never, he told himself with a spurt of anger, had he slipped his fool of a head into a trap more neatly than to-night. A locked door in front of him; a crumbling tunnel behind and, at the tunnel's end, a house occupied by the men whom just now he wanted to avoid. A girl, whom he should have known better than to trust, had said "Follow me!" and he had followed like a lamb at the end of a tether.

He heard her moaning at his side: "We are lost—they will kill us!" He grunted disgustedly. The disgust was for himself.

"Dilly, dilly, come and be killed!" was all that he said.

There would be a bit of killing to do, though, he promised himself with a certain savage satisfaction. They had him in this confounded hole like a rat in a box—well, let them come ahead and finish the job. Never in his life had he been more in the mood for such diversion as this situation began to promise.

He heard her stir and stretched out his arm, seeking her; his fingers brushed her sleeve and his hand shut down hard about her arm.

"No, you don't!" he said sharply. "You don't sneak out of this hole without me! Oh, it's a nice little game you've had with me, I'll admit; but once in it, you stay in!"

"You don't think—that I meant to trick you?" she gasped.

"Oh, no; certainly not!" he mocked her. "You couldn't guess you were leading me into a blind alley, could you? You precious little she-devil!"

After that she was very still. Presently he felt her arm quiver. Crying? Pretending to cry!

"Oh, you must do something—think of something to do! They must not find us here——"

Terribly frightened? It sounded like it. But he swore she should not fool him the second time. In the dark was she laughing at him? He'd know, soon enough.

The grip upon her arm he shifted down to her wrist. With his other hand he found and captured her other wrist. Soft and rounded wrists, warm in his strong clasp, unresisting; he began to feel a brute yet told himself he was only a fool. No doubt, even now, she was laughing at him; else her eyes burned in angry resentment, or were sullen because at last he had come to judge her aright.

With his free hand now he struck his third match. She dropped her head, hiding her face.

"Up with your head," he commanded her. "I'm of a mind to see what devilish sort of light is in your eyes just now. Up with it!"

"No!—Oh, I didn't want—Please, please, Bon Ord!"

"Do as I tell you! Otherwise you force me to be rough with you, for I swear to you——"

She must have known that in the end he meant to have his way and would have it. With a sudden gesture she resigned; she lifted her head and in the slight movement there was a world of defiance. Her eyes looked straight into his, unshadowed now, with no shadow across her face.

As for Bon Ord, never more surprised and momentarily bewildered in his life, he could only stand and stare at her. His match burned down before he so much as found his tongue.

"Titania!" he gasped.

He had let her hands go; he knew that they had flown to her face which was buried in them; he heard a long quivering sigh.

"I didn't want you to know—Oh, I am ashamed!"

Ashamed? Ashamed of what? That she had played the part of traitress? That it was she, who had come to him on the island like Aurora, with the sweetest gray eyes in the world, who now betrayed him into the hands of—her father! This, Leather Hide's girl? Leather Hide's own flesh and blood and kind? Incredible! Sickeningly impossible!

"I didn't mean to betray you—I was sure this door was unlocked, for I left it so myself! And now you will think——"

Just what was he to think?

"God bless you," he whispered softly, "you couldn't do a thing like that to save your life! For you couldn't—Titania!"

Now here was a strange thing—or, was it strange

after all? A moment ago, when she had been only "Leather Hide's girl," he had stood ready to suspect her of any deceit, to accuse and condemn her out of hand. And now, after one long look into a pair of eyes he remembered so well, he defied circumstance to convince him that she was anything other or less than each man, in his heart, holds the girl of his dreams to be. His reason might have cautioned him: "Here you go, Bon Ord, headlong and blindfold again!" But there are times when reason is the poorest and most brittle staff in the world to lean on; not all leaps in the dark carry a man down into the depths, but some lift him safely over the chasm into which another man, hesitating, might have fallen.

"Why in all these years did I never really see you, Titania? As you are?"

"Because—you didn't want to," she whispered. "Long ago, when I was a little girl——"

"But you weren't then like you are now! How could a man guess? Who would dream that Leather Hide's girl——"

"I am *not* Leather Hide's girl!"

"No. Not Leather Hide's girl. Of course not."

To be sure, since she said it! Yet mystifying, too. For the light, before it revealed her face to him, had shown him the familiar figure of Leather Hide's girl in the familiar ragged dress.

"Then—who are you, Titania?"

"Oh!—I don't know—you mustn't ask me—yet. I—Oh, Bon Ord, we are forgetting where we are! How long since you left the room where the men are? The others are watching outside; they will have been listening all this while for your steps upstairs. They

must know that you haven't left the house— What are we going to do?"

"If I only knew I'd tell you; and do it! We're in a fix——"

"And I got you into it."

"There, there," said Bon Ord gently. "Don't you worry. We'll take the trick somehow yet. Let me think."

His thinking indicated three possibilities to choose among: They could stay where they were, waiting for what might happen; for the others to locate them and come get them out. A waiting game, that; inactivity attendant upon uncertainty; it did not greatly attract. Or, he could set to work to hammer down the spring-house door. It would take time; it would make a noise. There remained the tunnel through which he had come to this place; he could turn back, find his way again into the house and take his chances with them there. One man against four or five, it would be. But in the dark he would take his chance. He need not return to the lighted room; he could fight his way to a window and hurl himself through it.

"You think they are sending for my father?" he asked.

"I am sure! Maybe a man has already gone——"

"Listen," he told her. "I'm going back through the tunnel. I'll go clear somehow, don't you fear. Remember the house is dark, all but the one room. You stay here. I'll find a way to get you out; they'll never know that you've even seen me."

"I'm afraid——"

"You needn't be," he assured her. "I can get back here, outside; I can pry off the lock——"

"Not for myself—for you!"

It dawned upon neither of them that night how unerringly his hand found hers in the dark!

"Haven't I told you you're not to worry? A few minutes now will tell the tale. You've but to be very still—and wait."

Simply to be still and wait! The thing he would not think of doing himself. He shoved back the sliding door to the tunnel's mouth and began groping his way back toward the house. A short path to tread, but one he disliked intensely; he felt at every step as though tons of earth were about to pour down upon him. He remembered the snag-end of a broken timber above him and stooped lower than before; he thought of the thing as a trigger the slightest touch upon which might explode a fearful detonation. The very thought of this place was enough to smother a man. Of such stuff were nightmares made.

Involuntarily he trod softly; he tried not to touch the walls with his shoulder; he crept along slowly despite an almost overpowering impulse to take this mole's path at a run and so be through with it. And, when at last he realized that he stood again in the cellar directly beneath the building, a sigh of relief testified to the swift relaxation of very tense nerves.

Like an echo to his own came a sigh just behind him. He whirled about, revolver in hand.

"Sh! I couldn't stay back there all alone. And I'll have to show you the way."

Poor little kid; of course she couldn't sit there, in the pitch dark, locked up, all alone.

"You will be just as safe here, after all."

But he felt her brush by him, leading the way quietly to the steep steps.

"I'll have to help you at the top; you'd never get it open."

"Then you'll wait? Until I've—straightened out things somehow?"

"Yes. I'll wait. I promise."

The door here opened like that other door below which had given them entrance to the spring-house, sliding to one side, a section of the wall itself moving. Slowly Bon forced it open, inch by inch, guardedly lest the faintest creaking sound might betray him. His eyes, accustomed to the utter dark of the underground room and passageway, stood him in good stead now, for though there was no lamp in this room the door to the hallway, which he had left closed after him, was now wide open and a dim light filtered in here from that other room where he had left Leather Hide and the fat man.

There was some one in this room, some one who had just entered from the hallway and stood now, very still, a few paces from the door. He had stepped to one side as a man would who did not wish to be seen, careful that his form be not outlined against the doorway. Yet Bon, used to the greater dark of the cellar, saw him.

It was Leather Hide who, his suspicions aroused by the long silence, had begun to make his own stealthy investigations. Had he heard the hall door open and close when Bon had been drawn here? Had he heard Bon's footsteps, guarded as they had been? Far worse, had he heard them but now as they mounted the steep stairsteps and slid the panel door open? Or was it only that he began here by chance, making a thorough search of the house? Bon remained very

still while he asked himself these questions, watching the shadowy form against the other wall.

And now he asked himself still another question: Did Leather Hide see him as he saw Leather Hide?

He tried to assure himself that this was not the case; to begin with, it was darker here, when Bon stood with the yawning blackness of the stairway at his back; further, Leather Hide had only now come from a lighted room and it would take time for his eyes to adjust themselves to the dark.

What to do? Leather Hide was but a few paces from him. He could cover the man with his revolver and talk reason into him. Yet there remained the others, two or three more of them. A sharp voice, a pistol shot would call them running. Time enough to send for them when he wanted them!

So, while he stood still and watched and waited, the matter was settled for him. Obviously Leather Hide had assured himself that the room was unoccupied—but meant to make doubly sure; to make sure, further, that no passageway had been found through his secret door. He stepped forward, coming nearer, slowly, watchfully——

Yet he needed, in coping with the man against whom he had pitted himself to-night, to be swifter than ever Leather Hide knew the way to be; quicker than lightning now, if he meant to take and keep the other hand. Bon gathered himself, crouching like some great cat. Leather Hide came on another step. Tenser grew Bon Ord, preparing to spring. Another step; surely now, at any instant, he must see the man awaiting him.

Like a released spring snapping into action, Bon sprang at last, driving the muzzle of his revolver violently into Leather Hide's middle.

"One move, one word out of you," he whispered savagely, "and I blow a hole through you big enough to stuff a quart bottle in!"

The only sound from Leather Hide was a grunt, and that was forced from him by the impact of the metal barrel; for a moment he could not have spoken or called out to save his life, so was the breath jolted out of his spare body. Nor, beyond a spasmodic jerk over which he had no control, did he move.

"Steady, old boy," Bon hissed into his ear. "Never a quiver out of you. I'll take the gat out of your hand; you needn't move."

He snatched the heavy weapon out of Hyde's relaxed fingers; then to make sure of his man, felt for Leather Hide's left hand. One never knew. And his fingers came in contact with a long coil of half-inch rope.

"Good enough!" he whispered. "You give me a hunch. Now listen, old turkey-neck. I mean business and I'd just as lieve blow that hole through you as roll a smoke. Get busy with your rope; you've got two hands and one of mine's right busy! Make a little loop at the end of the rope. *And work fast!*"

Leather Hide, since needs must be, obeyed.

"A slip noose, now," Bon commanded. And, when a noose had been formed by slipping the rope back on itself through the loop and Bon had assured himself that it was done as he wanted it, he commanded: "Turn around. Hands behind you."

"You——"

"Sh!"

"Did you call, Mr. Hyde?" spoke up an oily voice from the lighted room.

Leather Hide felt something hard and cold—a

man can feel the cold of a revolver through many thicknesses of cloth!—in the middle of his back.

"Tell him no. Tell him to keep shut up!"

"Shut up, you Fancher," shouted Leather Hide.

Working fast, Bon slipped the noose over one of the big red hands and drew it bitingly tight with a sharp jerk. A half-hitch, swiftly thrown, followed and tightened. A couple of seconds secured the one hand; scarcely longer was required to lash the other to it. Bon stooped and caught up the loose coils of rope.

"We step along into the next room, where Fatty is," said Bon coolly. And remember and keep on remembering, every breath you draw and every step you take—yes, and every look you look or thought you think!—that you were never quite so near the edge of the jumping-off place as you are this very split-second! So much as wiggle your ears, and I blow you to blazes. Give a sign for anybody else to start shooting, and I start one jump ahead of 'em! Got that? Got it good? Now—*step!*"

The only sound was that of the air whistling in Leather Hide's flaring nostrils. Then the sound of his steps as he obeyed. Close behind him, stepping with him so that it sounded like the footfalls of one man only, Bon followed, in one hand the rope, in the other the weapon always pressed tight against his captive's back. And so, in a few steps they passed across the hallway and came into the lighted room.

"Look here, Mr. Hyde, I've got a——"

What it was that Amos Fancher had was never to be disclosed. For of a sudden he saw that Leather Hide was not alone; that his hands were bound at his back; that, like a shadow, another man followed; and finally

that upon the face of that other man and shining out of his eyes was the most terrifying look Mr. Amos Fancher had ever witnessed in a life of considerable experience. Not to be overlooked was the black, ugly nose of the weapon which thrust itself into notice; to Mr. Fancher's popping little eyes its muzzle looked big enough to accommodate baseballs instead of mere forty-five bullets.

Bon's one quick glance about the room assured him that windows were shuttered as when he had left it. All that he required now was speed and silence—and no interference from any outsider until he arranged matters to his satisfaction. He did not believe that the fat man was going to make him any great trouble.

He thrust Leather Hide down into a chair, the one in which he had sat a little while ago, directly opposite Fancher at the table. With a double gesture he commanded Fancher's actions; the first part of his signal was merely for the fat man to put his fat hands out on the table before him, in emulation of his vis-à-vis, Leather Hide. The second command was a silent command for silence; most eloquently was it made by the weapon with the enormous muzzle! Mr. Fancher hastened to obey.

Bon's task now was most simple and, to judge from the fleeting look in his eyes, entirely congenial. A half-hitch, thrown skilfully about the fat wrist and drawn tight, pulled Fancher's hand close to Leather Hide's. Another half-hitch; the other hand; the same treatment. In half a dozen seconds the two men, sitting across the table from each other, were bound securely together, wrists lashed to wrists, arms stretched outst. Only their feet remained free; if he could take time now to tie their legs together——

"Necessities first, luxuries afterward," Bon grinned at them. Then he remembered the girl waiting for him in the dark; this was not one of his old carefree parties; he had to think of her and attend strictly to business. He stepped around to Leather Hide and rubbed the cold barrel of his revolver gently around that individual's left ear. Leather Hide, a man of cool, steady nerve, turned deathly white. As for Fancher he moaned chokingly and the sweat, popping out on his brow, dropped like summer rain to the table.

"You are to do just as I say, Leather Hide," said Bon softly. "No fooling, remember! Keep your mouth shut until I give you the high sign; then yell out at the top of your voice just these words: 'Hurry up! We've got him!'—Think you can remember that little lesson?"

Leather Hide glared and, for a moment, such was his rage that he seemed to swell like a toad; but he nodded.

Bon nodded, too, grimly. Then, with Fancher's bulging eyes on him and Fancher clearly persuaded that they had to do with a raving madman, he began stamping, making a tremendous noise with his boots on a bare floor; he caught up a chair and sent it crashing across the room; he shouted out once half inarticulately; he sent a second chair after the first——

"Now!" he whispered, standing over Leather Hide. "Be ready—wait a minute——"

There was the sound he had counted on; a back door flung open, the pound of footfalls, a voice—Vickers's voice—shouting:

"What's up?"

"Now!" And again the ice-cold barrel rubbed Leather Hide's temple. "Sing out!"

At the top of his lungs Leather Hide bellowed:

"Come ahead! We've got him!"

Vickers came at a run and at his heels came Mike Brady. They plunged into the room before they could stop—although as they came through the door they saw that something had gone wrong.

"Up with your hands, you lunk-heads!" Bon commanded them sternly. "I've got the drop on you; I've—Look out there, Vickers! *Drop it!*"

Vickers dropped it. With not one chance in a hundred, he dropped it in hot haste. His weapon clattered on the floor. Brady, empty-handed, had his hands high above his head.

"Pull up chairs and sit," snapped Bon, his voice hardly above a whisper but vibrant with deadly menace. "Not a word out of a man of you! There's another one or two of you outside? Leather Hide, play your little part again at the first sound; call 'em to come ahead. Meantime—*keep shut up—tight!*"

The two men drew up chairs and sat down, opposite each other as their companions were seated, like four men playing cards.

"Put your hands out, Vickers. Like your partners."

Not a word from Vickers, no hint of refusal, but a look of terrible fury.

"Mike, tie Vickers up; his wrists bound tight to Fatty's. Do a good job of it. *I'm watching you!*"

"Look here, Bon, this was only a joke——"

Mike broke off at a look and hastened to do as he was told. He drew the rope tight with a will; Vickers turned such a look upon him as made Mike Brady's hands shake. Yet there was an even more eloquent

look turned on him and he went through with his work.

He had hardly finished and sat there, unbound himself, when again there was a step in the hall. Bon flashed a look at Leather Hide, who started, fought briefly with rage and hatred, stubbornness—and fear—and called out sullenly:

"Come on, boys. We got him all right."

The newcomer, hurrying into the room, was a little, swarthy man with enormous black mustaches, enormous black eyes. And even those large and expressive eyes of the little Italian did not seem big enough to contain his astonishment. His jaw dropped down as he stared about him, his gaze concentrating at the end upon Bon Ord.

"Come ahead, Tony," said Bon sharply. "We're having a party. Sit down!"

Tony, slow to understand, appeared quick of appreciation when comprehension did come to him. A wide smile spread his lips.

"They got you, Bon—lika da rabbit got a dog, huh?"

"Squat, Tony."

"Sure," agreed Tony and sat down. He even saw what was next to be expected of him and put his dirty hands out to the middle of the table. "You see," and all the while his black eyes were passing reproachfully from face to face of his companions, "I tella you betta go slow dessa time——"

"Where's Marco, Tony?" asked Bon. For where Tony was one always looked for his friend.

"Same time you come, Marco go," returned Tony.

"For the sheriff, maybe?"

"For sure," said Tony. And laughed softly. "Dees maka fine joke, huh, Bon?"

"It's got all the makings," admitted Bon grimly. "Now, Mike, finish your job. Don't keep Tony waiting."

Mike worked at the little Italian's hands with less reluctance than he had manifested tying Vickers. Bon came closer and carefully examined the result; made a little addition of his own; finished by tying Mike's hands to the others. Then he cut the rope.

"You boys just sit still while I put on the finishing touches," he advised them. "Otherwise, I promise you, somebody's going to get hurt."

He had to go down on his hands and knees for those finishing touches; the rest was easily and swiftly done. As he had tied their hands together above the table, so now did he tie their legs together under it. He finished his job chuckling.

"Bring on your sheriff!" he mocked them. "Who cares?"

He gathered up all the weapons he could find, went to the door and hurled them as far as he could out into the night. He stepped back to make sure with a last searching examination that no man of them was likely to free himself in any short time. Then he turned to go out—to return to Titania——

An irresistable thought suggested itself as he looked into their sullen faces; an inspiration, no less. He would not be here when the sheriff arrived; he'd leave a message that his dad, God bless him, would understand; John Ord should have his laugh, too!

There was the bottle of ink. Bon dipped a forefinger into it and in big black smears wrote his initials, a great B. O., upon the forehead of each man! Odd that that, after so much else had happened, should set

them to straining at the rope that bound them and to breaking out at last into a storm of curses and threats!

The job done to his thorough satisfaction, Bon left them. They could hear him laughing as he went.

He found Titania waiting for him in the dark room. Silent, side by side, they slipped out of the house, which had grown very still again.

CHAPTER XI

SHERIFF JOHN ORD stepped in at the open door and went swiftly to the one lighted room. Here he came to an abrupt halt, staring with frowning eyes at the room's occupants.

Seated about the table he found five men. At first glance it looked as though their ten hands, congregated at the centre of the table top, clutched at something which each man meant to have for himself. From this heap of hands Leather Hide's emerald blazed out.

He saw the rope then and his bushy brows rose sharply, then came down slowly as his eyes narrowed. He saw the looks on the men's faces clearly revealed by the solitary lamp. A grin on the swarthy face of the little Italian; a comic look of mingled consternation and relief spread across the fat man's ample visage; stamped on Mike Brady's countenance an indescribably sheepish expression. There remained Leather Hide and Ralph Vickers; for the moment the two looked alike, so did each man's face burn with fury and chagrin, so evilly did the eyes of both gleam. They had the appearance of some strange new sort of dangerous explosives done up in human form.

"I'd give fifty dollars for a picture of you birds——"

There was so much to see all at once, for the man who came expecting to find something altogether different; only now did the sheriff see how each man was marked on the forehead, branded, as it were, with a great black "B. O." Here was a thing he could puzzle

over at one instant and understand fully and completely the next. A sudden great roar of laughter burst from Bon's father.

"I see Bon has been here, all right! There was no lie in that part of the message you sent me. By the Lord Harry, there are times when I'm proud of that boy! Five of you, like silly sheep—and Bon's mark on the herd of you!"

"He tricked us," snarled Leather Hide, his red face redder with shame and anger and the strain he constantly put upon his bonds. And then at the top of his voice he yelled: "Tanny! Hurry, won't you? What are you doing, anyhow?"

"Tanny?" said Ord. "Who's Tanny?"

"My girl; she's been out all night—and I'm going to know what about!" growled Leather Hide. "She just came in a minute ago——"

Leather Hide's girl appeared, evidently from the kitchen, for she carried a big kitchen knife in her hand and hurried forward with it. The sheriff relapsed into uncontrollable mirth.

"What's the knife for? Just to turn you loose? Or is the girl going to make the best of a rare opportunity and cut your throats for you? I've a notion to turn my back until the thing's done! The whole county ought to offer a reward for a good job like that!"

"Bon would have done it—if he'd had the time. Hurry up, girl."

"Young lady," said the sheriff, "suppose you let me have that fancy carver of yours? That's a good girl. You see, I don't want the picture spoiled for a minute or two!—So Bon tricked you, huh? I imagine it was

just the other way 'round, to begin with! Set a trap for him, didn't you?" he jeered at them, "and then let him turn the tables on you!—And would have slit your gullets, if he'd had the time?"

"Well, why not? Having plugged Delamere——"

"You lie!" Ord told him sharply.

Leather Hide stared.

"You mean——"

"I mean Delamere was shot in the back of the head; and every man of you knows that's not Bon Ord's style of work. One of you—whoever did the job—made a mistake there, my friend. You should have shot him in front, even if there was some little risk to run. There's no jury in the world would ever convict Bon of plugging any man from behind. He leaves his mark—in front," and he laughed again into the five faces with their big black letterings. Then he added reflectively: "Looks like indelible ink, too!"

"Of course you'd say so, being his dad," muttered Leather Hide. "And of course you'd pretend to be after him and make sure all the time he didn't get caught."

"Other men are saying the same thing," admitted Ord coolly. "But of course they're all men of your stamp. I'll gather Bon in the first time I get a chance, same as I would any other man skipping out the way he did.—Say, whose your fat friend?"

"Me?" spoke up the individual in question. "Name of Fancher, Mr. Sheriff. I'm in the lumber business and——"

"I could take you with me on suspicion," returned Ord, "just for being in the company you're in. Lumber business!"

"Look here," said Vickers, who had not spoken. "Going to cut us loose or not, Ord?"

"Our hands, Mr. Ord, hurt something terrible," said Fancher. "I don't know as I'll ever get the blood to running proper in mine again."

For the moment Ord ignored them, turning to the girl who appeared anxious to slip out at the door.

"You in rags, always in rags," he muttered, "and your old man always sporting a flashy ring! H'm. One question for you, my girl: Where were you when all this was going on?"

She answered in a low, hushed voice.

"I—I sometimes go outside, off by myself, far off, when all these men come——"

"Do they—does any one of them in particular, ever make things hard for you?"

Involuntarily her eyes sped to one of them, one in particular; to Ralph Vickers. But she had not meant to look at him, and hastened to shake her head.

"I've got my eye on every one of you birds," said Ord sternly. "Don't forget that. Young lady, if any one of the bunch so much as looks cross-eyed at you you've but to get word of it to me."

He stepped forward then, cut the rope in a couple of places, left the knife on the table and went out.

"If Bon didn't kill Delamere, why's he on the run?" some one called after him.

"That's the first question I'm going to ask him when I get my rope over him," returned the sheriff, and mounting his horse rode away.

He had come on a run; he returned over the same trails slowly, plunged deep into thought. As he had told them, never for an instant had he suspected Bon of

a thing like this; Bon might get involved in a quarrel, might in hot blood do almost any fool thing. Anything but shoot a man in the back. But from the first and Bon's flight it had been his job to arrest him and demand an accounting. Bon might know something; no doubt he did; it was like him to take things into his own hands.

"And I'll get him," muttered Ord, "if it's the last job I do."

In the thickest of the forest a man rode out into the trail in front of him and waited for him to come up. It was too dark to see anything but the vague, blurred form of horse and rider; he would have missed both had he not heard first the horse trampling underbrush.

"Who's there?" demanded the sheriff.

"Hello, Dad!" came a cheery call.

"Bon!"

Gone in a flash was the sheriff's apathy. A touch of the spurs and his horse carried him swiftly to the meeting.

"Giving myself up, Dad," said Bon. "You see, I had to have a talk with you."

His hand was out; his father saw it dimly and his own went out with a rush to meet it. What Bon was doing was offering him his revolver.

"Don't be a fool, Bon. I don't want your hardware."

"Good man, Dad!" said Bon, slipping the weapon back into its holster and then giving his father his hand in a good, hard grip.

"Glad you did this, Bon." The sheriff eased himself sidewise in his saddle and a long, grateful sigh testified to his great satisfaction. "Figured out that

you might do it, too, soon as you'd had time to think a bit."

"I thought," said Bon, "moving quick that night I might find out something."

"And didn't?"

"One of the men in the cabin, when you raided us, tried to hold me."

"Which one?" demanded the sheriff, quick to see what Bon meant.

"Wasn't I an idiot for not grabbing him and holding on tight when he grabbed me? It was in the dark, you see, Dad; and I was on my way. I did the natural thing, of course; smashed him and broke loose and didn't realize until too late that if he held me it was for a reason and that he was the man we want. Leather Hide? Vickers? Mike or Tony or Marco? They were all there."

"Not the fat man," mused Ord. "He wasn't there. Know who he is, Bon, or anything about him?"

"He fits in—somewhere," said Bon. "But no, I don't know as much about him as I'd like to know. By the way, I bought that piece of land to-night; the lake section."

"That's what you were doing at Leather Hide's?"

"That's how he was pretty sure I'd show up. Told him I had the cash ready."

"How much, Bon?"

"Nine thousand. Worth it, too."

"Cash you said? And with those jaspers knowing you had it, you carried it right among 'em?" The sheriff laughed. "You're crazy as a loon, Bon."

"Anyway," grinned his son, patting his pocket, "I've got the land, he's got the money and——"

"And there they sat, those five devils," grunted Ord thoughtfully, "one of 'em with nine thousand dollars in his jeans—and the other four knowing it! I wouldn't say but old Leather Hide's as loony as you are. He's taking chances."

"Mind if we take a little ride?" asked Bon. "Before we go on in—wherever we're going."

"We're going to wake up the district attorney, but there's no hurry. I guess I've got nothing much to do between now and daylight. Where do you think you want to go now?"

"By way of my cabin. There'll probably be some one there——"

"That confounded tea-drinker?" grumbled the sheriff.

Bon laughed.

"You've got it in for him because mother's dippy over him. You're a jealous old Turk, I do believe. Never mind who'll be there; I have a question or two to ask you. What did Doc Cuttle have to say about Delamere?"

"He remarked," said the sheriff drily, "that that young scamp had handed in his chips for good and all. Said you'd sent the tea-drinker after him with word to come *on the run*! He took your word for it—and would have cussed you blue had you been there. What was the rush, says Doc, when the sick man was all over his misery and had been for six or seven hours when he got there?"

"Six or seven hours?" Bon repeated. "Then it was done at least four or five hours before I got there! That's the way I figured. All of which will help let me out."

"Where were you?"

"Alibi? Let's tickle the ponies' ribs." Their two horses jumped under them at the light touch of the spurs and as they sped along side by side, Bon said: "You can remember back a dozen or fifteen years better than I can, Dad. Just when was it that—that Leather Hide's wife showed up?"

"What in blazes has that got to do with politics?" queried the other sharply.

"Don't know. There's a lot I don't know. And there's a lot I want to find out. Suppose you answer me."

The sheriff pondered the matter as they clattered along.

"It was in the fall of the year," he began, questing among memories. "That winter I bought the gray colt of old man Zebberley's. That would be fourteen years, come next October."

"What sort was she?" asked Bon eagerly.

"A man would say that you're getting all warmed up over ancient history," grunted Ord. "What sort? Why a young woman and as pretty as a picture; quiet, shy, sort of. Nice enough, folks said; I only saw her a couple of times. Kept by herself mostly."

"The kind you'd think would marry him?"

"Not by a jug full! But then, when it comes to women folk, you never can tell, my boy."

"So I've heard, old-timer. Before she showed up here nobody had even heard anything about Leather Hide being married, had they?"

"Where are you drifting, boy? No; I don't know that anybody knew anything about it. But Leather Hide was always the man to make his goings and com-

ings strictly his own business. When he was off on a prowl somewhere if he wanted to take himself a wife, I don't know that he'd be running around saying so, or asking if any one cared."

Brought her little kid with her, didn't she?" Bon went on. "How old, about?"

"The kid? Four or five, maybe; not over six, I'd say. Didn't look at her teeth," grunted Ord. "But you can guess as well as I can; Leather Hide's girl is about Ann's age I'd say. Why all this interest, Bon?"

"I haven't finished. How long was it after the two of them, mother and daughter, came that the mother died?"

"Not long. She wasn't well at the time she first showed up, if I remember. Looked nervous, half sick and the other half scared to death. I'd say she lasted a couple of months; six, maybe, and maybe less."

"What was the matter with her?"

The sheriff stared at him as though he could see Bon's face in the dark.

"Don't know, and don't know as I ever knew," he answered. "Old Doc Cuttle might know something about it—and might not. If you're hinting at anything, why let's have it? And if you're trying to tie something ugly to Leather Hide—well, it's a long time back, my boy."

"I'd do a lot more than hint, if I knew what I thought myself. Yes, it's a long time back. Just the same we'll have a run-in with Doc Cuttle about it."

They rode in silence, Bon's eyes straight ahead, the sheriff turning again and again toward him, frankly puzzled. Presently the older man offered:

"That girl of Leather Hide's strikes me as having the makings of a decent kid in her; strange, too, when you think who she is and how she's been brought up. I watched her cut her eye across at Flash Vickers once; I've a notion there's something between those two."

Bon started, calling out sharply:

"What do you mean?"

"Like you, son, I'd say it if I knew! All I saw was the look. I'd say she's afraid of him. By the way, where was she to-night, do you suppose, while you were having it out with those jaspers?"

"In the house," said Bon. "Hiding."

"But they told me——"

"I know. She slipped out with me when I made my get-away. Then she insisted on going back, but waited outside until she heard you coming. She's all right, Dad; she's a bit more than all right!" he added warmly. "Listen; I'll tell you what she did."

Ord listened and marked not only every word but Bon's very inflection, glimpsing something of his hearty eagerness, and something more than mere eagerness. Again, each man occupied with his own darting thoughts, they lapsed into silence.

"We'll have to keep our eye on that girl, Bon," said the sheriff after a long while.

"We're going to," Bon told him crisply.

Through the trees they caught glimpses of a light. The lamp burning cheerily in Bon's cabin shot its rays out through an unshuttered window, welcoming them.

CHAPTER XII

"NOBODY home," said the sheriff with a glance about as they entered. "Even your new friend, Sir Charles, T. D., appears to be away."

"T. D.?" queried Bon.

"Tea Drinker," grunted Ord. "These birds that carry a title in front always have to balance up with the rest of the alphabet on the other end.—Realize, don't you, Bon, that he's probably a fake? Like the whole raft of those Russian dukes, German counts, and dago princes; all fakes."

Bon laughed.

"Not Random. He's a square guy and a good sport. By the way, Dad, and there was a twinkle that would not be hid in his eyes, 'how'd you like to have your daughter called Lady Ann? I'll bet you'd puff up until you blew to pieces.'"

His father swung about on him, demanding savagely:

"Are you crazy, boy? Ann's got more sense—You don't mean for a minute—Good Lord!"

"I roped him that first night," chuckled Bon, "mostly for mother, partly for Ann. It would be a good joke on you, too. They can't help liking each other, those two."

"Let me see the first sign of that sort of thing," snapped Ord, "and I'll arrest Ann on a charge of lunacy and railroad her down to Napa! I can stand for your mother being foolish a bit; she's got provoca-

tion. It's the chance of her life to hang it on the old girls around Redwood Center. But Ann—Nothing stirring, sonny."

"Ann might have a thing or two to say about it. She's that kind of a girl."

"Ann's got nothing to say about it!"

"And there's Random himself. If he goes after a thing I imagine he'll stick to it."

"He'll get his nose pulled for him," Ord snorted.

"You're a fierce old Indian chief," Bon remarked good-humoredly. "Regular snake-eating old savage. Let Ann get hold of you, though; pshaw, she'll make you lie down and roll over and stick your paws up and wag your tail and just be good dog all over. Drop, Dad; have a chair, stick your feet up on the table; have a drink or a smoke or what you like. It won't be long to wait."

The sheriff sat down, elevated his boot heels as directed and asked:

"Who's coming, Bon?"

"Sir Charles, T. D., for one. I streaked over here as soon as I got through with Leather Hide *et als.* tonight, and Random was obliging enough to play errand-boy for me."

"Who's to come back with him?"

"Here they come now," said Bon.

The sheriff, when he saw who it was returning in such hot haste with Random, made no move to get up. He left his boot heels where they were, merely saying shortly:

"You mean Merriweather's your alibi, Bon?"

"And why not?" cried the old man. Already he had rushed to a meeting with his grandson, catching

him by both hands. Over his shoulder, beard bristling, he challenged Bon's father with his belligerent, "And why not, sir? Who'd the boy turn to, being in trouble, but to me? You're ding-danged right I'm his alibi!" He began clapping Bon heartily on the shoulder, adding with emphasis: "He knows who'll stick by him, blow high, blow low! Alibi? Why, I'd swear the boy was with me when it happened—if I hadn't laid eyes on him for weeks! What's a friend for—yes, and a pardner—huh, Bon Boy?"

"That's the trouble," said Ord dryly. "Everybody knows it."

"Of course they do," laughed the old man. "Nobody'd ever say—Hey? What's that? What'd you say?" All of a sudden it dawned on him just what had been said and agreed to. His eyes blazed with sudden and familiar fury. "Call me a liar, Ord? Mean to say my word ain't as good as any man's? Insinuate, would you, that I ever spoke a word in my life, or ever would, that wasn't gospel truth?"

"Steady on, King Canute," laughed Bon. He looked affectionately up into the glaring old eyes; here was friendship. Friendship at its best between an old man and a young. Understanding, sympathy, and love.

Bon turned to Random, just coming in.

"Thanks a lot, Random," he said soberly. "I'm your man if I can ever return the favor."

"Righto," said Random. "Now, as it looks like a family party, I'll step outside for a smoke."

"Nothing of the kind. Come on in. Now, Dad, suppose you and King Canute leave your side arms where they are for a minute and we'll get down to cases. As it happened, I was with this same Bill Mer-

riweather when somebody here must have been shooting at Delamere. Tell him about it, will you?" and he turned, serious now, to his grandfather.

King Canute started clawing at his tucked-in beard, bringing more and more of it to light with each quick jerk.

"Bon rode over to see me that day——"

"What time?" demanded the sheriff sharply.

"Time, your foot," snapped the old man. "There's me, I suppose, sitting out in the yard with my clock in my hand, waiting for him? Don't be a fool, Johnny Ord."

"If you're in a position to do Bon any service," said Ord coolly, "you'll have to have an idea of the approximate time."

"Teach your grandmammy how to pick geese!" his father-in-law jeered at him. "Guess I know what I'm doin'.—Bon Boy," he said reproachfully, "you'd ought to come to me first off, 'stead of draggin' this man into it."

"Go ahead; tell him the yarn," said Bon.

"Hmf! Like I said, Bon rode over to my place along about noon. Half past twelve, to be exac'. To the dot it was. And we had lunch together, talkin' about horses some, most of all about buyin' more land; and Bon stayed with me until—What time was the shootin' pulled off over here, anyhow?"

"If that's the line of talk you're going to put up to Guard Lawlor, I don't know that it'll help Bon much," grunted the sheriff.

"Guard Lawlor?" demanded old Merriweather. "How's he cut in on this? What's he got to do with it?"

"Happens to be the district attorney, that's all," said Ord.

"Hmf! Yes, that's so. Bringin' him into it, I suppose? Passin' the buck, sort of? Lord-Lord-Lordy! If there was only a man standin' back of that tin star you wear! Why'n't you turn Bon loose and forget it? You know he didn't kill that skunk; least-ways, if he did, not without reason."

Bon, the corners of his mouth twitching, mirth and appreciation contending in his eyes, intervened.

"Dad and I are going to ride in pretty soon to have a talk with Guard Lawlor," he explained. "Can't leave the district attorney out, you know; he might get sore and send me to the pen just to even things up!"

The old man meditated, liking the suggestion little, to judge from his angry expression; before he spoke he had brought to light another eight or ten inches of beard.

"He's a gibble-gabble-goose, that district attorney, along with the rest of his breed," he exploded finally. "But if you're bent on seein' him, let's blaze along. I'll tell him a thing or two that'll do him a sight of good; things to remember."

"If you don't mind," said the sheriff stiffly, "I'd like to hear what you know, first. How long Bon was with you; what time he left, as close as you can figure."

"Hmf!" He took off his flap-brimmed old hat, scratched his head, put his hat back and set it at an angle eloquent of defiance. Then his eyes trailed away to his grandson. "Just what time was it, Bon, when you climbed in the saddle again? What would be your idea about that?"

"It won't do, old-timer." Bon shook his head and

thought, still smiling. "And I'll tell you this, on the level: I'm not in the least danger in the world. I'll never be brought to trial for this. Guard Lawlor, when Dad and I have talked with him ten minutes, will know that. Now, fire away."

"Danger? Who ever said you was in danger, Bon Boy?" Yet the fierce old eyes cleared and a look of vast relief swept across the old man's face. A windy sigh might have brushed away the last webs of doubt. He straightened, looked long and piercingly at his son-in-law; then without a word strode across the room to a corner cupboard. He yanked out a quart bottle, squeezing it by the neck as though he meant to choke it to death, bent his piercing eyes upon it as though to make sure he had killed the thing, then whipped it to his lips and drank with the air of an old cannibal draining his victim's life's blood. He had been nervous; no one but those few who lived with him out on his ranch guessed how nervous. To jeopardize his grandson was to pull all the props out from under the universe. Now he learned that Bon was in no danger; had it from Bon himself! He shuddered violently from head to foot; a shudder that had nothing to do with fear; just that delicious shudder of old Bill Merriweather surrendering briefly to the pleasure of a real drink. Then, having blown out his cheeks and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, he swung about on the others in the cabin, remarking cheerily: "Let's go; old Bill's a man again."

Bon, who understood him far better than most, loving him better, said quietly:

"You see, King Canute, Doc Cuttle hopped right out here, as soon as Random could get word to him what

had happened. And Doc says that whoever shot Delamere had done it several hours before. That's why a word or so from you——"

The old man had listened eagerly. Now, however, having been quick to glean the great, shining fact, of a sudden he threw up his hand, commanding silence, roaring out:

"Nary a word, Bon; nary a word! In what I got to say I want to be sure I ain't prejudiced none by learnin' what anybody else says or thinks! It's the sweet, pure and naked truth you'll get from me—and I only hope that same truth don't in any way injure your prospec's, my boy." He cleared his throat, fine old humbug that he was, balanced forensically a moment on the high heels of his boots, took a fresh grip on his beard, and observed thoughtfully:

"Like I said, Bon showed up at my place for lunch. We fooled over our eatin' quite a long spell, too, both bein' hungry, the dinner bein' good, and us havin' some business on our minds. We went into the question of some new stock we're buyin'; that big red stallion of Beaucamp's and a couple of fancy mares from the stock agent. And we had to talk over land a bit, too; Bon, he's buyin' the lake section off'n old Leather Hide, and me, I'm stakin' Bon to a part of the money for that. Then there's that section of timber north of my place; I'm thinkin' of rakin' that in, and I wanted Bon's advice. So havin' got done chowin', we're off on horseback to look over my new section. I'd say it was one o'clock anyhow; maybe half past one, when we started. We looked at timber and we looked at water and we looked at pasture. Two or three hours, anyhow, we poked around. By the time we rode back

to the house and Bon stuck around a bit, foolin' with the horses out in the corral, it was anyhow 'way after four; closer five o'clock, I reckon. Then he moseyed along about his own business.—And he couldn't have got back here short of a full hour, and ridin' some at that."

Even John Ord, though he had watched and listened suspiciously, looked relieved. He did ask one question, however:

"Of course some of the men out at your ranch saw Bon, too?" he remarked casually.

"'Course they did—Look here, you Johnny Ord! If you're meanin' anything by a nasty insinuation—meanin' my word ain't good enough without bein' backed up by some hired man's——"

"Nothing of the kind," laughed Bon hastily. "Dad's just being official for the minute; the sheriff, you know. The more corroborative evidence we can scare up, the better."

"Let's have all the facts," said the sheriff coolly. "Who else saw Bon out at your place?"

"Why, the cook, of course," cried old Merriweather. "And Buck Emmet, the man that's breakin' horses for me right along. And Injun Pete, that was fixin' fences up at the north end. There's three, anyhow; every man of 'em a man of high honor, too; every man a man of his word; every man knowin' that if I ever caught him in a lie I'd fire him sky high! That's the kind of men I have around me, Johnny Ord!"

Even Bon had to grin. The kind of men old Bill Merriweather had around him were the kind to do just exactly what he told them; the kind to ask few questions, having orders—and commensurate pay! At

least two of the three men mentioned were well known to the sheriff's office.

"Let's drift along," said Ord. He brought his feet down from the table and stood up. "Ready, Bon? The sooner we have a talk with Lawlor, the better."

Bon was ready, when he had wrung his grandfather's hand. The old man looked after him wistfully.

"Better let me ride along in with you," he suggested. "I'd twist that little Lawlor's neck for him if he got nasty."

"Oh, Guard Lawlor's an all-right fellow," Bon assured him. "No; we've put you to enough misery for one night. Better mosey along home and have a sleep. I'll run in on you pretty quick; to-morrow if I can."

Of them all it was Random, whom they had forgotten, who was first at the door.

"Better put out your lamp, Bon, if you're going to be gone long," he said. "I'm off for a ride."

Bon stared at him, demanding curiously:

"This time of night, man? Where on earth are you going?"

But Random, already outside, did not trouble to answer. He hurried to his horse tethered to a post, mounted, and rode off. The sheriff, too, looked after him interestedly, wondering with his son where Random could be thinking of going. Perhaps it was just as well that he did not know. For it was to keep a promise that the Englishman, with fine disregard of the time, sped away toward Indian Rock. It was understood between him and Ann that each was to advise the other of any news; and here was such good news that he had no mind to keep it to himself until morn-

ing. A handful of pebbles against her window—she had told him which window—a few whispered words, and both would sleep better thereafter.

A few whispered words, no doubt, should have sufficed—but did not. Ann commanded him softly to wait. She dressed in the wildest haste and came creeping softly downstairs to meet him in the starlight. They went to the bench under the old apple-tree. For an hour they talked; she must hear everything, every single word.

When toward morning John Ord came home he saw a light burning in his little daughter's room. As he stumbled about in the lower darkness, striking matches and looking for a lamp, Ann, fully dressed, came running down to him with a candle.

"Oh, Dad!" she cried happily. "I'm so glad!"

"You look glad all right," he retorted. "Just what's it all about?"

"About Bon, of course? Where is he? Why didn't you bring him home with you? I've made some coffee; I'll run up and wake mother now——"

Vastly puzzled, he muttered:

"So you know already? Who in thunder told you?"

"Why, Charles——"

In her flutter of excitement she had quite forgotten that she had not planned to mention Random at all. She stopped swiftly and flushed.

"'Charles!'" grunted Ord. "This time of night? Confounded T. D.!"

Ann wrinkled her brows at him.

"'T. D.'?" she repeated.

"Tea Drinker!" he snapped. "Titled Dunce.—Terry-Diddle——"

Ann burst into tinkling laughter.

"Why, Dad! You old bear, do you know what's happening to you? Look out for growing old; you talk just like—Grandpa Merriweather! Terry-Diddle!"

John Ord groaned.

"Go call your mother," he said shortly. "She'll want to know."

And when Ann went gaily upon her errand, he sat staring blankly at a blank wall.

"Like Bill Merriweather!—Hell's bells and no pitch hot!"

CHAPTER XIII

BON was finding a new zest in life. To the man who has always been essentially free, his freedom itself can only be appreciated to the full when once it has been put in jeopardy. Only after passing through a region of deep shadow can he know the full glory of golden sunshine. Brimming days now spilled over in crystalline joyousness. A free man, drinking deep of his liberty—and he had found Titania!

He awoke with the first shy peep of day. To wake was to stir; to leap headlong into the rush and flood of life. His bare heels thudded on the bare floor. He groped in the dim light, found a boot and hurled it with all his might against the cabin wall, further shattering the placid quiet of a dawning day by shouting at the top of his voice:

"Awake, slave!"

Random, in his bunk, merely snuggled a bit deeper among his covers, muttering sleepily:

"Shut up, will you, old bean? I'm sleepy."

Bon, with a tremendous bound, was across the floor, had yanked the blankets off his friend's bunk, and carried them away in triumph. Random shivered, sat up, and yawned.

"What's gone wrong with you, I'd like to know? You carry on as though you owned the world and wanted everybody to know it!"

"I do! The world is mine—Say, Bard, you can write me a song around that idea!"

"Think it may have been done already," suggested Random. A couple of million times or so."

"Right?" said Bon. "Can it, then. We'll have something new and original. All our own. How about a song to—ah—to Aurora, you know? Goddess of the Morn, and all that?"

"Bright idea," jeered Random. "New, that; fresh, sparkling; oh, quite original.—'Aurora'? And I thought that no girl ever trailed her shadow——"

"Aurora hasn't any shadow," said Bon cheerfully.

Random yawned again and stretched and went for his morning bath in the kitchen. Bon aided him in his ablutions, administering a cold bucket of water with such skill and effect that the other adopted the idea and returned the kindness.

"Yes, sir," said Bon, pulling on his shirt over his head, "the world is mine. Later on I may divide; right now I'm holding the whole of it. Look at me; I've got a Slave, a Troubadour, a Secretary, a Hired Man, a Cook, a Stable Boy—Listen, Slave; know what I'm going in for?"

"Lunacy."

"Ducks! I'm going to buy about a thousand ducks. All kinds, you know; lots of little wood ducks which maybe you don't know are mighty pretty little cusses, most all colors. But I'm going strong on white ducks with yellow bills. Swans, too. Big white ones. Take that little lake of mine now; why it's been waiting since Adam for somebody to put ducks on it. They go steering up and down and their reflections go sailing along with 'em. You'll write letters to-day, Mr. Secretary; lots of letters. To duck companies all over the country; you'll send for prices and catalogues and instruction booklets——"

"Duck companies?" demanded Random. "Just ad-

dress 'Ducks, Limited, U. S. A.,' I suppose. 'Dear Mr. Drake; kindly send me a thousand assorted ducks——' "

"Geese, too," said Bon. "Then I'm going to build me my place out on the island. It's going to be a real place, too, boy. Some fancy boats; canoes, maybe; maybe gondola-style? I'll keep 'em chained up to the island. Nobody'll come and nobody'll go, unless they give the password."

"And the ducks will squawk when the enemy comes!"

"That's an idea! We'll train 'em. That'll be your job, minion. Now, come alive." He clapped his hands together, shouting; "Ho, Slave! Breakfast!"

"I'd have had a pleasanter time of it if they had put you in jail for a short time—say ten or twenty years," remarked Random and, rolling up his sleeves, went to the kitchen. Presently, above the other sounds of stove-lids rattling, frying-pan falling, wood thumping and boots sloshing about in the water on the floor, came his deep voice lifted heartily in "Rule Britannia." One would have said that he was another man who was enjoying life.

He had insisted from the start that Bon Ord was responsible for his being here, having literally jerked him at the end of a rope into this phase of his existence, and therefore was morally responsible for his care. Moreover he believed he began to fall in love—with this wilderness country. He'd stay. He'd work for Bon for board, lodging, and a hundred dollars a month; it was Random himself who made the suggestion, considered it, agreed to it, and elected himself to the position. Further, since he liked old Bill Merriweather and could stand for Bon, he admitted that he would

consider a partnership with them. Land and horses; here were things he could understand, things to appeal. Yes, he'd become a partner. Of course he was a trifle short of cash right now; but he did have a couple of hundred dollars which he would put into the pot gladly. And also there were his wages. Added to all this, Random said that he had a bit of stuff in old England that he could sell; he'd send a wire. Just what this merchantable "stuff" was Bon did not know; he fancied there was a bicycle, a couple of shot guns, some books, and fishing tackle——

"But this idea of getting up before day," said Random with a dubious shake of the head. "I don't know so well about that. Long hours, old pill; extra time, extra pay. Keep this up and we'll compromise on a fifty per cent advance in my pay." Then his eyes drifted soberly to his companion's very gay ones. "Just what's it all about?"

"I'll tell you," said Bon, cooling his coffee in his saucer, an act which found Random interested almost to the point of fascination. "To all appearances, except to those few of us who happen to know, I'm still on the dodge. Dad and Guard Lawlor and I cooked it up among us. It isn't to be generally known that I've been pinched and let loose."

"Good enough. But what's back of it? Whom do you count on fooling?"

"All old Leather Hide's gang, to begin with. The man among them who croaked poor Delamere, in particular."

"He's to think himself fairly safe? And maybe to be trapped?"

"A man when he gets careless is apt to tip his hand,"

said Bon. "How do these hot cakes affiliate with your personality, old-timer? Be glad when I show you how it's done? When I get time I'll break you in on real table manners, too; teach you how to eat the right way, putting both elbows on the table, spreading out a bit, you know, then showing what we call efficiency over here. An American word, that, by the way."

"So you're off before sun-up? Just where? What doing?"

"And," he had for no answer at all, "I'm coming in after dark. Be sure you don't lock up. I'm taking a hand-out along; meals have been none too regular and plentiful lately. You'd better look over the larder and stock up some."

"We're about out of jelly and jam."

"You'll have to see Ann about that end of it; it's her job to keep the jellies and sweet stuff on hand."

He was already filling an old knapsack and ended by making a very considerable inroad upon their supplies. Random's suggestion came at the proper moment; the last glass of jelly and pot of jam went into the knapsack.

"Thought you were coming back to-night!" said Random. "You've got enough truck there to provision an army.—I'll wager you're having somebody with you!"

"Good bet that," grinned Bon. "You ought to give odds, ten to one on it."

"Aurora!" cried Random with sudden inspiration. "That's why the man's hair is combed this time o' day! That's why he has had a shave since I saw him. That's why he's got his newest boots on and a brand new, violently red bandana around his neck! Dressed

to kill—and trying to make me think he's off to the woods hunting bad men!"

"Aurora, you poor boob," Bon reminded him, "is another name for the morning. I go to meet the morning——"

"I hope the morning will approve," said Random dryly. "To my mind you'd be slightly less offensive to the eye if you'd let your hair alone. Looks like you'd had the plasterer in——"

But Bon was gone. Random returned to the table and a second cup of coffee. For a while his mind followed the man who had just left him, and he speculated idly on his movements. The coffee stimulated appetite; he buttered one of the two remaining hot cakes, hot now in name only, and reached for the jam. Like Bon, the jam too was gone.

"I'll have to stock larder to-day without fail," observed Random, and even smiled at the empty glass. "I'd better make a list of the various articles while they're in mind."

He got paper and pencil and wrote down: "Jelly & jam." Then he returned to his coffee and sat over it and his cigarette with a far-away look in his eyes. Abstractedly, the pencil coming under his idle fingers, he filled out his list: "Jelly—jam—Ann——"

Meanwhile Bon on his favorite horse was racing through the woods toward his newly acquired lake. Lake Aurora, its name was, while the picturesque tiny island imaging itself upon the clear glassy surface was to be known, henceforth and forever, as Titania's Isle. He had not stopped to saddle; a rope about Nabob's neck, with a loop thrown over his nose, sufficed. He meant to be at a certain particular spot before most

men were astir and while only this wan half-light trembled through the slowly awakening wilderness.

The sun was not yet up when he came to the lake shore. Here he took the rope off Nabob, commanded him softly, "Go home, Nabob. Home, old boy," and sent the animal trotting off. He went to the old boat where his father had told him he had left it, drawn up among the willows. In the conference at the district attorney's house it was agreed among them that pretense was to be made at pushing the search for Bon; that that search was to go forward anywhere but where he actually planned to be. To the outsider Bon was a fugitive. In reality he was his father's new deputy. There at Guard Lawlor's he had been sworn in; even now, pinned inside his shirt, was the badge of his authority. Bon Ord—Deputy Sheriff! It made him laugh. But then he was of a mood for laughter. Random was right; he sat atop the world!

He rowed out to the island as swiftly as the lopsided old boat permitted. Behind the willows edging the cliffs he crept along stealthily, less to be hidden himself than to be careful not to betray to any one on earth that hiding-place which had sheltered him once—and Titania so many times.

The secret place was empty. He might have known that he would not find her here; he had told himself a dozen times that of course she would not be here. Yet he was disappointed. He wanted to see her and he did not want to wait; it seemed a year since he had touched her hand and heard her voice and looked into her eyes.

From his overflowing knapsack he filled the tin in which she kept her supplies. Here was the proper

place for the sweets of which he had robbed Random. Keeping back enough for his own noon meal—and something over, since it was always possible that he might have company for lunch!—he went back to his boat and rowed away from the island, this time heading for the north shore. The first glint of sun shone above the eastern ridge as he shoved the old worm-eaten prow into the sandy beach.

He stepped on into the little winding trail which dived into the depths of the forest, still heading north. Thus he paralleled the course of Wild River but going upstream; thus he approached the centre of a great triangle indicated by the three points he had it in mind to watch: Leather Hide's home, ahead and to his left, Leather Hide's aloof cabin, ahead and to his left, and, finally, the island now at his back. Now and then, through an opening among the trees or over their tops, he caught glimpses of the place he made this morning's destination, a sharply upthrust region of rock and cliff soaring to a craggy pinnacle known hereabouts as Landmark Mountain. It was a grim, black, solitary peak, its crest readily accessible to the man who knew its every boulder and iron-rooted tree, offering a refuge in which one might lie snugly hidden and whence, were he ever alert, he might catch glimpses of those who came and went upon the woodland trails.

The very top was crowned by a gigantic boulder. At its side a clump of sturdy cedars, wind-blown and twisted, found root in the scanty soil of a little level space. From this side Bon climbed up; from the further side any ascent would have been impossible, so sheer were the precipices at whose edge stood the monster boulder. Bon dropped his knapsack at the roots

of a tree, climbed to the flat top of the rock, lay flat and made his morning cigarette.

Through the cedar branches he could see where Leather Hide's home was, though the house itself he could not see, hidden as it was by the edge of the forest. The lone cabin on Wild River was lost to sight from here, tucked away in a fold of the mountains. But here and there were restricted glimpses of the trail connecting the two places. And very clearly he could see the island in the lake, the whole of the lake itself, and the way leading down to it did a man ride from either Leather Hide's house or the lone cabin.

As the first thin blue wisp of smoke stole upward from his cigarette another larger smoke drifted upward from beyond the trees. They were up now at Leather Hide's. Titania getting breakfast. For old Leather Hide. For the fat man, Fancher. Bon frowned gloomily. It was a dirty shame that a girl like her had to do anything on earth for men like that—unless it be sit serenely while they blacked her shoes for her! Well, Vickers and the rest wouldn't be there; she'd neither have to serve them nor be a mark for their confounded eyes; Leather Hide always quartered his men at a distance. For them, the cabin. For himself, aloofness. Only Titania and, now and then, one of his "queer customers."

"Only one man tried to hold me when Dad raided their hang-out," mused Bon, watching the distant chimney for smoke. "He's the gent that actually did for Delamere. The whole works schemed to tie me up and hand me over to the sheriff, though; so it looks like they were all mixed up in it. And the fat man? On the dodge himself? Rum-runner, dope peddler, all

'round crook, clearing out of somewhere to make on a run for somewhere else? Just like most of Leather Hide's transient visitors?—Not by a jug-full! Maybe all that; then a bit more along with it.—'He'd like his share of those emeralds!' is what Titania heard him say. You bet you would, Fatty Fancher! And you've got an idea in your head. H'm. Better go slow, just the same, Fat. You're doing business with a bad hombre. Taking chances right along, I'd say, even if you did write yourself a letter saying where you were going and why.—I've got to have a good talk with her; I've got to get her out of that mess of rattlesnakes. I'd go right straight to the house and dare old Leather Hide to so much as lift an eyebrow—but it would be sure to get her in wrong. Let them once even guess she might have had anything to do with my slipping through their hands—Won't do, old boy. Patience, you know. Hold your horses."

Patience for a man like Bon Ord? Then there would be something new under the sun after all! He was fidgeting before his brief-lived cigarette was pinched out and flipped over the cliff. To lie, holed up, in inactivity while others moved, planned, and drove their schemes onward to fruition!

He looked off toward the place where the hidden cabin stood on the river bank; there, too, rose a column of smoke; Vickers, Mike Brady and the two Italians were starting their day. Doing something; getting ready to do something. "Patience!" Before the first hour dragged by Bon, grown more and more restless, began to note that some of that rare zest with which the morning had begun was filtering out of life for him.

"Remember," his father had said to him, "your main job is to keep under cover for a few days. I wouldn't mind at all if those jaspers thought you'd skipped the country. And if meanwhile you can keep an eye on that neck of the woods, you may stumble onto something. I've an idea Leather Hide will keep the rest away; all but Fancher. And that he and Fancher may be up to something—almost anything. I'd like to know anything you can find out."

At the end of the first hour Bon told himself that he had found out exactly nothing. Great business, this, he snorted disgustedly. The second hour with a double zero for results. Except, of course, the negative knowledge that no one had ridden from house to cabin or from cabin to house. He would have welcomed the sight of a man chopping wood! Serene quiet days of solitude he was used to; they were a part of his very existence; he had found his greatest happiness in the long sunlit hours alone in the mountains. But it was different now——

Far off, darting into his vision in a little clear space among the trees, gone again almost instantly, a little, hurrying figure caught his eye. He leaped up. Tintania herself going toward the lake. Escaping the house and the men it held, going her lonely way.

"I've had enough of waiting," said Bon. "They also serve who get busy."

He went down the mountainside far more rapidly than he had come up. All of a sudden the teeming zest of the day was back. A new gleam was upon the quivering pine needles, a new glory in the sunshine.

She would pass close to the base of Landmark Mountain. In a grove of firs he awaited her passing.

Here, now, was waiting of quite another order, eager, tingling, athrill with promise. He saw her and lost her again among the trees. Why, she was almost running! Poor little kid! Fleeing from her home which she hated, which she feared, going for comfort into the bigness of the solitudes. To have to live as she did, a girl like Titania!

He moved forward among the trees to intercept her. A moment later he saw her coming hurrying toward him. She was in her old ragged dress; she carried a paper parcel in her hand. She did not see him until he stepped out into the path, calling softly:

"Titania!"

She stopped with a little breathless exclamation. A low cry of surprise; certainly not of displeasure.

She stood looking at him wonderingly. He thought that her eyes looked frightened, that they cleared to a sudden light of gladness, that in the end fear came back into them.

"I am afraid!" she whispered.

She came toward him impulsively as he, too, moved swiftly to a meeting.

"What is it, Titania? What are you afraid of?"

"Oh, I don't know! Of nothing—of everything——"

"Not of me, Titania?"

She shook her head, her curls whipping back and forth.

"Not of you, Bon Ord!"

"Listen, Titania. I saw you coming; I was up on top of old Landmark. So I came to meet you. You promised me that we would have a long talk—soon. You've a lunch in that paper? I've a knapsack. We'll

slip away into the woods; we'll make a holiday and a picnic of it!"

She slipped her hand gently out of his. He saw how, all the while he had been speaking, she was looking back over her shoulder.

"I think—Oh, maybe I'm just getting nervous!—that some one is following me! I slipped out quietly, as I always do, but I just feel that somebody is following. And—I'm afraid! Afraid now to stay at the house, afraid in the forest——"

"Who would it be?" he demanded, all of a sudden very grim about the mouth and hard as to eyes.

"It might be—Ralph Vickers. I am afraid of him, most of all of him. He looks at me——" She shuddered. "I wear my oldest clothes, I look as ugly as I can—He looks right straight down into my mind, into my heart."

So Vickers dared look at her, did he? An ugly vision formed before Bon; just Vickers standing and looking at her, his evil eyes burning. And she—tried to make herself ugly! The fairy queen trying to hide her glowing loveliness behind tatters.

"I hope it is Vickers following!" thought Bon angrily.

She had caught his arm and stood listening, looking back along the winding trail.

"Sh! Some one is coming!"

He saw what she meant to do; to step out of the trail and slip out of sight among the trees. And to draw him after her. He hesitated.

"If it is Vickers——"

"I don't know who it may be. We can watch and see. Hurry, hurry, Bon. Please, Bon, hurry!"

A dead limb, carelessly trodden on, snapped at no great distance. Whoever it was coming made haste.

"All right," whispered Bon. "Into that thicket yonder. I'm with you."

They quitted the trail and within a score of steps were well hidden, screened by the thicket and further concealed by a log behind which they lay. Dimly they descried a hastening figure, blurred by leaf and branch and twig intervening, so that at first they could not make out who it was. But he came on into full sight, a man looking anxiously this way and that, with many a backward glance, yet seeming to quest something that had gone on before. The two in hiding looked at each other curiously.

"Fancher!" muttered Bon. "And he's looking for you? He's followed you?"

"He always looks at me as though he were wondering about something. Then he looks away when he sees that I notice. Once I thought he was going to say something—the door opened and he kept still. Oh, if I only knew all that he knows! Maybe he followed to tell me; maybe I ought to go to him——"

"Wait! First let's see where he's going. We can follow him."

Fancher, puffing mightily, hurried on at a labored, trotting gait and soon disappeared. The world grew very still save for the eternal ebb and flow of the rustle and murmur through the tree-tops.

"Would any one know that Fancher had come this way?" asked Bon. They stood up, listening for any sound to tell them if Fancher still plodded along, trying to catch sight of him again through the trees. "Leather Hide, would he know?"

She shook her head.

"He was off to the other cabin. I heard him say that he had to have a word with Ralph Vickers. I slipped away while he was out at the barn for a horse."

"And Fancher waited his chance, then hurried after you? Well, we can turn the table on him and follow him for a spell and see what he's up to. He's far enough ahead now——"

He had started leading the way. She saw him grow suddenly still, then draw back to her side.

"Down!" he whispered commandingly. "He's coming back—No, there's some one else coming—some one following Fancher!"

Not Fancher returning; they knew that as soon as they heard the newcomer's tread. Here came one who travelled more swiftly and far more stealthily. Breathlessly they waited. Would it be Vickers this time? And did he, too, follow the girl, or was it Fancher he followed?

They saw the man clearly for an instant only as he hurried along the path. His head moved nervously on his long neck; he was peering about him, seeking something. It was Leather Hide, and never in his life had Bon Ord seen on any man's face such an expression as he now saw, a look of murderous malevolence. He went on. The face flashed upon them and was gone. But the glaring eyes, the distorted visage remained in their memories. And even when he had passed out of sight and they no longer heard his quiet footfalls, something of the man himself seemed to remain in the very air about them, some evil emanation, some sinister black magic of a power to put an ominous hush into the silence of the forests, to make the sunlight itself bleak and wintry.

CHAPTER XIV

"HE had something in his hand—I couldn't see—was it a gun?"

"He'd kill at the drop of the hat," whispered Bon. "He's like a wild man; a man gone stark mad with murder in his heart. And he's following the fat man!"

"Maybe he's—following me!"

He had had the same thought and his blood had run cold.

"No. No, it's not that, Titania. Why should he follow you, with a look like that branded on his face? He's after Fancher. He let him think that he was going away, then watched through a crack in the barn. He saw you go; he saw Fancher hurry out to catch up with you. And——"

"There's something that man knows——"

"Fancher, you mean?"

She nodded eagerly; larger than ever were Titania's great gray eyes now, wide with horror. She could not go on. Bon spoke for her, saying:

"And Leather Hide doesn't want you to know? He's afraid that Fancher might talk with you, ask you questions, maybe; let his cat out of the sack?"

"Yes! I've felt it. All along. There's something. It has to do with me.—Oh, Bon Ord! You're older than I am; you can remember farther back than I can. Can't you help me? They know; both of them know. There's just the one question; they could tell me!"

"What, Titania?"

"Who am I?"

"Sh! He mustn't hear; maybe he hasn't gone far." He patted her shoulder gently. "Help you? Don't you worry; you bet I will! You're dead right that Fancher knows a lot you and I want to know. And we'll never hear a word of it if Leather Hide is left alone with him this morning."

She caught his arm as he turned toward the trail; he could feel her hands tremble.

"You are going after them?"

"Yes. If I can't do anything else I can warn Fancher; I can give him a chance for his life. Will you wait here, Titania? Or better, go on deeper into the woods; straight across to the creek. Stop before you get to the meadow; I'll meet you there as soon as I can."

He slung his knapsack across his shoulder to have his hands free, nodded brightly to reassure her, and stepped into the trail. Once he turned to wave, to urge her with a gesture to withdraw into the deeper woods; then about a turn in the trail he disappeared.

She stood a long while motionless, ears strained to catch the slightest sound, eyes striving vainly to catch a glimpse of him or those in whose tracks he had gone. Never was stillness so deep; that ominous hush which Leather Hide had left in his wake seemed to her overwrought nerves to grow heavier, more and more sinister. The soft rustling of the tree-tops was like hushed breathing; the world about her seemed to wait, tense and hushed, for some evil happening. Here and there about her the sunlight quivered tremulously and black shadows were like stealthy, living things.

She lifted her foot to take the first step toward the

spot where Bon had promised to meet her—and put it back silently in its own track. She had heard something! She stood tenser than ever, glancing about in all directions. Nothing. Only the empty woods. Strange that all of a sudden this emptiness itself could be like a positive quality, a thing to crush, to awaken a quick flutter of fear. Stillness; a faint far sound, the falling of a ripened cone, the crackle of dry leaves under a bird. Very, very far off the scream of a blue jay.

She stirred again, this time in the opposite direction. She would return to the path herself, going the way Bon had gone, hurrying to catch sight of him. She must see and hear; she must know——

Then, only in time, she crouched down where she was. She had heard something; the lowest of sounds swiftly repeating itself, grown clearer; a man's tread on the cover of pine needles spread thickly under the trees. Not Bon returning; a man following Bon! As she had glimpsed Leather Hide, so now for a vivid instant did she see this man. Here at last came Ralph Vickers!

Vickers following Bon Ord—Bon following Leather Hide—Leather Hide following Fancher—Fancher, himself, thinking that he pursued her! Each man with no knowledge of what lay behind, of what dogged his heels; each man knowing only who it was moving on before him. And Bon between Leather Hide and Vickers!

Would Bon once turn? Would he think to look behind him or would his eyes be tricked into watching only that which was straight ahead? She was on the verge of screaming a warning but realized before it

was too late that surely Vickers would hear and that Bon might already be too far away.

It was like some hideous nightmare. Man following man, death watching over them all. What throat, warm now, would in a moment be caught in the icy grip of the implacable fingers? If Leather Hide meant murder—she shuddered again and turned sick as she remembered the look stamped on his face—Bon might come in time to stop him. Leather Hide would turn on him, crazy with rage. And behind Bon came Vickers!

She hesitated no longer. She moved silently, as stealthily as any of them. She began running now. Deeper into the woods, dodging about trees, but not meaning to come to the little meadow by Willow Creek. In a moment she would turn again, paralleling the path. She would get ahead of Vickers, ahead of Bon, perhaps; she would lie hidden and watch the trail and be quick to warn him. This must be before Vickers came too close; before Bon came up with Leather Hide.

Far ahead Fancher puffed along. Drenched with sweat, his face dripping, his clothes wet and adhering to him, he strove wildly to come up with the girl whom he thought to be fleeing on before him. His close-set little eyes sought on every hand, probed into shadows, down green aisles, through thickets; everywhere but behind him. Why look behind? Was not Leather Hide, dogged, sullen, stubborn, stupid dolt, far away, off for a conference with his cutthroats? Leather Hide, Leather Head!

So, pressing on eagerly, panting and puffing and sweating, Fancher came at last to the edge of the wood where a steep bank sloped down to the lapping waters

of the lake. And never a sight of the girl! He stood looking blankly out upon the shimmering, sun-smitten expanse of blue water. She had come this way; where, then, had she vanished? Not on the lake; nowhere on the lake shore. Yet he had followed the only trail.

A log lay close by; he slumped down on it and began mopping his streaming forehead. For the moment, head bowed, he saw nothing; heard nothing but his own labored breath. After his exertion he wheezed like a pug dog.

Close behind him came Leather Hide now, stepping softly; closer and closer through the straggling trees making their ragged fringe to the wood. There was no misdoubting his purpose, even though his face went unseen! his crouching carriage, his high nervous tension, something purposeful and dreadful in his stealth; he was like some night-prowling, predatory thing, striking a purely hideous note as he crept through splotches of golden sun; an assassin, a murderer already in his heart. Vibrations emanated from him, hot, poisonous waves spreading all about him. Something exudes from men in the grip of the tremendous primitive emotions; it pervades the air. It is to be felt.

Fancher shivered and jerked his moist handkerchief down from his florid face. He stiffened and turned this way and that. He put up his head like a dog sniffing; he cast a quick startled look over his shoulder.

Nothing. Only the still tree trunks, the gently stirring branches, the irregular patterns of shade and sunlight. Not ten feet from him was a big sugar pine. Its ample girth could easily have concealed one standing behind it. He had the curious sensation that there was some one near. Not behind that particular pine, perhaps; just near. He turned toward the lake again;

its gently lapping waters below him made the only sound to draw his attention. The blue expanse, as before, was empty; unchanged saving that a soft puff of air made sudden playful little ripples.

He was very still a moment. Then he called softly: "Hoo-hoo!"

It sounded more like a little owl calling than a man. He cocked an ear attentively; called again, not loud, his voice meant only for some one who might be very near; some one playing tricks on him.

"Hoo-hoo!—Tanny! You're hiding, somewhere near."

Even Fancher, after he grew silent, must have marked how the low whisper of the pines was like a breathless, commanding, "Hush!" He peered a long while into the forest at his back, his eyes running along each open aisle and ferreting out each scraggly thicket. No one. Only that deep, brooding silence; only that great, vaguely disquieting emptiness. A long sigh escaped him. His shoulders slumped again, he dropped his head and mopped again at his burning face.

Like a shadow for silence, Leather Hide stepped out from behind the sugar pine. Less than a dozen paces more to go, and the fat man slumping, oblivious, a moist lump of inertia, a soft-bodied thing to be crushed. There was to be no outcry, no noise; a blow struck and an unbearable situation wiped clean away. The hand at Leather Hide's side came up slowly; higher and higher with each creeping step. Not the gun which Titania had feared; something, at this time and place, seeming a thousand times more terrible. A homely implement which Leather Hide would have told you was a single-jack; a small sledge-hammer.

Was it his thought to strike without a word, from

behind, giving no warning? So that Fancher died swiftly, never dreaming that he was to die, never knowing why, never knowing who struck? It might have lain in Leather Hide's brain, crazed with its own virus, to have called softly when at last he stood over his victim; to have said very quietly: "Fancher!" Fancher would have whirled; he would have seen; no cry could have risen from his strangling throat once his eyes looked into those terrible eyes of Leather Hide. And Leather Hide could strike—with all his might—a little grunt in the effort—swinging, both hands together——

Fancher did not see and did not hear. Could one hear the wood-spider creeping up the bole of the nearest pine? Nor did he turn.

But Bon Ord, coming on swiftly, saw from a bend in the trail not twenty paces away. The sight sickened him. There come times when a man, no matter to what he has nerved himself, no matter for what he is prepared, feels so great a shock of revulsion that something within him cries out and strives to master him, something crying poignantly, "This thing cannot be! Incredible, impossible! The sun is shining; the ripples are playing on the lake; the little breeze blows; big white clouds drift and the sky is a deep tender blue!" How could all those things be true, and true this other thing?

Leather Hide was incased in an invisible, intangible yet none the less all-excluding shell; it was night in his soul, night foul with reek and slime and neither blue of sky nor gold of sun, neither whisper of air nor sigh of ripple entered there. He was a man shut in upon himself by the exudations of his own spirit surrounding

him. Had he seen his own face then he must have dropped his single-jack and run; run from what he saw, fleeing from himself, terrified.

His stealth was uncanny. He was unhurrying. The game was in his hands now; at any moment, did Fancher grow alarmed, he could leap and strike. But, unless the fat man turned, he would come closer. He had judged to a nicety the exact distance at which he would swing the hammer.

Bon, at one instant fascinated, spellbound, at the next was cool and alert, grim potential master of the situation. As quick as thought his hand had sped to his holster; his revolver leaped out——

A sound among the trees at no great distance from the trail on his right made no impression on him. He would never have thought of it again had there not come a sudden vibrant whisper from close at hand.

"Bon! Vickers is behind you!"

Vickers behind him! Vickers behind—Leather Hide in front! Some devil's trap for him——

He did not turn; he could not! Leather Hide had taken the last step; the hammer was up now, lifted high above his head.

Bon fired. The one shot only. Then leaped to the side, among the thickest of the trees at the trail's side. And that was a shot that even Bon Ord might be proud of; one to remember. To have killed Leather Hide would have been easy; but he had not wanted that. To stop murder being done, that was all that he was here for; that accomplished he would be glad to be somewhere else with Titania.

His bullet, with an angry "sput!" struck the hammer handle not a full inch from Leather Hide's little finger,

but first it had passed through the crown of his hat. A clipped lock of hair, a hat shot off his head, the hickory handle of the single-jack splintered in his hands—and for a second Leather Hide was like a man stunned. As Bon would have said for him, “He didn’t know just then if he was afoot or horseback!”

Even Fancher was swifter to act. He sprang up, stared with bulging eyes, saw the man behind him, saw the hammer fall. He had heard the shot; he had thought naturally it was for him. He tried to say something; clutched at his throat; burst at last into a shrill scream and began to run.

Of a sudden Leather Hide’s frozen inactivity passed. He whirled, forgetting or at least ignoring Fancher, and snatched out his own weapon. His eyes were everywhere at once, narrowed, glinting, feverish eyes. The woods seemed empty.

Then into full sight, running forward in the trail, came Vickers. He had heard the shot and, his own revolver in his hand, plainly meant to take part in whatever was going on. All that Leather Hide saw was Ralph Vickers charging toward him.

“You sneakin’ dog!” he roared, and began shooting.

Vickers leaped behind a tree. A bullet from Leather Hide chipped a heavy piece of bark so close that a ragged edge cut Vickers’s cheek.

Vickers began shouting angrily, trying to make Leather Hide understand that it was not he but some one else who had fired that first shot.

“It will take a bit of explaining,” whispered Bon Ord to the little figure trembling at his side.

He put out his hand and caught hers, pressing it

hard. If he had not had her warning he wondered just how this thing would have ended. Tragedy and comedy, and farce all stood so close together at times, each ready at its cue to take the stage.

He drew her away, silently, more and more swiftly. Those two whom they left behind would be quite a while, he thought with satisfaction, coming to an understanding.

"We'll have our picnic yet!" whispered Bon.

And, as he heard another shot, another yell from Vickers and another roar of rage from Leather Hide, a sudden joyous grin played like sunlight across his face. He looked for all the world like a little boy who has just learned that teacher has the mumps.

CHAPTER XV

WILLOW CREEK glinted through a delightful bit of forest land on its merry way to a junction with Wild River at no great distance above the lake. It sparkled and purled, flashed glassily smooth, quivered into ripples, dived into cool pools, thundered over great rocks, played with the willow ends which it caught and set aquiver, raced through light and shadow, and happily performed its share in making the world delectable. Hither came Bon and Titania.

"If they should find us here?" she said apprehensively, looking back.

"No chance," he returned lightly. He chuckled and added: "Those two have entered upon a little argument which will keep them occupied for a while! Hyde will want to know who shot if Vickers didn't. Vickers won't know; he didn't see me. Hyde will want to know what business Vickers had here in the first place. Vickers will have to hunt an answer! For he was tracking Hyde for some reason, and that will take a bit of explaining!"

"But when it is explained? In ten minutes or half an hour?"

He shrugged.

"They'll no doubt leave the fat man alone for a while, knowing that some one is about and may be watching. They'll look for me, for the man that fired the shot and spoiled Leather Hide's morning for him? Let them look, if they like; they'll never find us where we're going now."

Ten minutes later he led her into as secret a place as this rugged, timbered land afforded. Close by the creek, but shut off from it by thick willows, was a tiny grassy spot, flooded with sunshine, sweet with tiny grass flowers, further secluded by yet other willows ringing it entirely about. One might come within ten paces of this place and yet not see those who sat motionless on the grass. They crept through the screen of greenery and Bon threw down his knapsack.

"Now, here we rest and here we talk, Titania."

"It's strange," she said thoughtfully, "that you should have called me Titania! You didn't know——"

"No, I didn't know. Funny, wasn't it?"

She had appeared before him like a vision and he had called her Titania. And now it began to appear that Titania might really be her name. Strange? Many things are strange and remain unexplained. A coincidence, says one; chance, says another. While a third stoutly maintains that there is no such thing as chance and that coincidence is but a name for that which the groping human mind yet finds elusive.

"I wish that I could have heard what the fat man wanted to say to me to-day," she said.

She had told Bon of Fancher's hints she had overheard when he talked to Leather Hide and Vickers appeared half asleep, leaning back against the wall, and they had thought her away from the house; how he had mentioned the young widow—a San Francisco woman—she went in for emeralds, too—she had a little girl. "With a funny name; easy to remember, seeing it was such a funny name: Titania."

"I've talked all that over with my father," Bon told her. "He didn't know much about it; he didn't say

much; but I could see that he was interested. He's going to see if old Doc Cuttle knows anything. But there's one thing: He knows that Jim Hyde began buying emeralds after you and your mother came. Hyde has never had a bank account in his life; there are lots of men like that. He always has done business in cash. He has always kept his money in cash.—If at any time anything happened to make him decide to be on his way somewhere else in a hurry, he wouldn't have to go to a bank first! He could stuff his wad in his pocket and step along!

"But the time came when he began putting his surplus into another form of portable wealth. They're as good as gold, I reckon, and— Did you ever happen to watch him while he was looking at an emerald?"

She nodded; her eyes were vaguely puzzled

"He has sat by the hour at times, hardly turning his head, staring at a ring or a pin which he had just got. He doesn't look like the man they call Leather Hide at times like that. He looks—" She faltered, as though hesitating at the word: "He looks kind! He looks—" and she hesitated longer: "Loving! It's the strangest thing. It doesn't seem real, some way! It frightens me! He is like another man. You think he buys them only to have his wealth in a little package that he can carry in his pocket? No, it isn't just that. It's more than that. And if a board should creak or a log snap in the fireplace, you should see the look that comes into his eyes! You saw him to-day? When he was following the fat man——"

He had seen and would never forget.

"He can't carry them always about him?"

"Just the newest one, I think. He gets money; he

goes away; he comes back with a new emerald. He watches it on his finger while he eats. The other one is gone; I never see it again. Sometimes he tells me he has sold it or that he has traded it for the new one. But I know better! He wouldn't part with one of them for anything on earth."

"He keeps them hidden somewhere then? I wonder where? What sort of a hiding-place would a man trust for the thing he loves best on earth? How can he bear to go away from it at all? How does he know that some one is not stumbling on it?"

He was thinking all the while: "The thing that a man loves best on earth—I would not want her out of my sight——"

"I don't know where he keeps them; I haven't the slightest idea. I don't care."

"But, when we have heard Fancher, maybe you will care! If your mother brought the first of them, they may be yours, Titania."

"I have thought of that. But I don't care, I tell you. All that I want is to know!—Oh, I have felt within me for years that this man was not my father; that he couldn't be! I want to know who the young widow was, why she came here—and that Jim Hyde was nothing to her!"

His heart went out to her; how slender was the thread on which she hung her wild longing!

"Do you know anything definite? Has Fancher said anything that you can tie to?"

"Only scraps, only hints, only tantalizing remarks I have overheard. But why did he speak of 'a young widow and her child?' If she had been—Leather Hide's wife, he would not have spoken that way!"

"There'll be ways of finding out and don't you fret,"

Bon told her quickly, eager to encourage. "Dad's interested, I tell you; he'll dig back and back through the years like the corking old-timer he is, and he'll dig up every scrap of the truth."

"The man Fancher may be—killed," she said with a shudder.

"After this morning, I think not," said Bon. "They'll go slow, not knowing who saw."

"He may go away. He will be afraid and go and we'll never find him, never learn what he knows."

"He'll not go far. Trust dad for that, too. He couldn't slip away, out of this country, to save his life."

She sighed and for a little while sat silent, her hands clasped in her lap, her eyes upon the flash of the creek through the willows.

"He is not the only one who may decide to slip away," she said presently.

"You mean Leather Hide himself?" he asked quickly.

"Yes. He's nervous and suspicious; he has been ever since the fat man came. I've seen a look in his eyes—like a hunted animal, like something in a trap and watching all the while for the way out. Oh, I imagine so many things where I know so very little. Did he kill Dick Delamere? I don't know; but I do know that if he disappeared now people would think that he was the guilty one and would hunt him and bring him back. And I know that he must have thought of that, too. Last night he sat alone a long time and looked at the emerald on his finger. He jumped to his feet and went raging up and down, muttering all the while like a mad person. He makes me think, I tell you, of something tangled in a net."

"He is in a net, he and his crowd. Yes, maybe

he'd be on his way if he had the chance. Well, he won't have it."

Of a sudden she noted something which, so were her thoughts and fears elsewhere, she had failed to note before; it was how he had spoken of his father, of having talked of all this with him. With suddenly widening eyes she exclaimed:

"But you, too, are being hunted down! Your own father has been trying to arrest you!"

He explained briefly. He even showed her the deputy sheriff's badge which he wore to-day for the first time.

"I had meant to tell you the first thing," he smiled at her, "but we've had rather an unsettled sort of day of it, haven't we? No, that ugly part of it is over and done with. I am hoping to do my part best this way; I was lucky enough to do a bit of it just now, with a bullet in a sledge handle. Most of all I'm hoping I can do something for you."

"For me? What can you do for me, Bon Ord?" she asked quickly.

"There's this, for one thing: With matters as they are now and as they seem to be growing, you can't think of going on living here; you, a girl alone with these men. You must let me take you away from it, Titania."

She looked at him curiously.

"Take me away?" she said. "Where?"

"To my mother. She would be good to you, Titania. You'd love Ann and Ann would love you."

For a moment her lip trembled and a mist gathered in her eyes. He leaned closer to her then; he wanted to gather her up into his arms; child of loneliness and

of little love, one whose one prayer on earth was that the man who had ever been held to be her father might prove to be no father at all, he felt an infinite pity for her. All the gladness she had ever known she had wrung from the solitudes herself.

Something of all this he glimpsed in that brief moment. Even so, but a little could he plumb the depths of wretchedness which had been her birthright. He could not realize how, as Leather Hide's girl, she had been forced to grasp at every chance ray of sunlight, hugging it tight to a hungry breast. She had seen men come and go; loathsome men, beasts, snarling brutes fleeing the whiplash of the law; wrongdoers who broke every commandment; men like Vickers. Men like Hyde himself; like Fancher.

She had fled from these; she had gone deep into her beloved forest throwing herself down upon the warm comforting breast of the earth; she had made companions of figures in her dreams, and friends of tree and stream and lake. And once, from the spires and towers of her crowning city of dreams, the very king of her dream-companions had ridden straight into her actual, every-day life! What a gallant figure he was—as she saw him! To be known for himself when he came flashing out of her fancies into her real existence. His horse itself was like a prince's; his accoutrements, knightly. The flaunting red handkerchief about his muscular brown throat, the argent-spurred boot heels, the great black hat, with brim thrust back, in the fine rollicking fury of his riding like any plume! His voice was not the voice of the men she knew; more as she imagined golden bells ringing softly. His laugh like a clean wind blowing.

He had come; he had scarcely tossed a glance toward Leather Hide's girl in her ragged dress; he had sped on, comet-wise. He had been gone long, very, very long. Sometimes she had heard his name mentioned and had hung breathlessly upon each light word spoken. He had come again, flashing across her tiny orbit as before, sprinkling joyousness, leaving shadow.—She had found his picture in an old newspaper; it became her greatest treasure.

And now he would stoop down, put out his hand to her and ask to lead her to another home!

She shook her head. He could not see her face now.

"It is no worse where I am than it has always been. There is no danger for me; why should there be—I know that I should love your sister! Oh, I know it! But I am not so sure," and she turned to him and smiled a little wistfully, "that she would like me. And, besides," she hurried on, seeing him about to interrupt eagerly, "I must stay where I am to try to find out something. It's my only chance—ever to be happy."

"Will you let me arrange for Ann to come to see you?"

"She wouldn't want to come to the house. I wouldn't want her to. Oh, I'd love to see her but——"

"You are away from the house a lot, like to-day," he insisted. "Maybe we can make a picnic of it for four! There's Random; he's a good fellow. Likes Ann, too, and I guess she sort of likes him. They get along fine together. You and I would make a hit with them, Titania, just leaving those two to themselves a bit!"

How swiftly her expression could alter! How bright she could be with half a chance!

"I thought you wanted Ann and me to be together," she said, peeping at him out of the corners of her eyes. Bon laughed.

"That's so," he admitted. "And there I went, forgetting it right off. Oh, you'll have to watch me. Anyway, I'll arrange for Ann to look you up."

"Maybe she won't want to," she insisted doubtfully.

"I'll make her," said Ann's brother cheerfully and quite after the fashion of brothers in disposing of their sisters' acts. "Did you know," he added, seriously or in deep mock gravity, she could not tell which, "I believe Ann's in love! Love all of a sudden; old-fashioned love at first sight!"

"All the less reason that she would care to see me——"

"You're wrong; dead wrong there! I've noticed with folks in love, they're mighty happy or think they are; and they want other people to be just like them. Now Ann, she'd see you—she'd see me—she——"

He was getting where he had not meant to go so swiftly, about to make clear that Ann, being in love, would never rest until certain other "people" were in like state. He floundered to an abrupt halt.

Titania laughed. But he saw that her cheeks flushed. And for some reason or other Bon found the day fulfilling all the zestful promises of the morning.

CHAPTER XVI

BON found a light burning in his cabin, late though it was that night when he turned homeward. Hearing voices, he went quietly to the door and stood a minute listening. Who would be stirring this time of night? Random for one, but the other?

"Prime licker, young feller," cried a voice heartily. "Let's have another. We'll put her down, the same as the others, to my gran'son. The only member of his family that's——"

Bon threw the door open then and burst in on them. Random turned quickly, a look of relief on his face. Old Bill Merriweather surged up to his feet and came forward, both hands out, his old hawk's eyes bright and eager.

"Sounds like conviviality," laughed Bon. "Like you're proposing a toast that I could stand for myself."

"Blew in early, to see how you're makin' out," said the old man, having wrung Bon's hands and smitten him resoundingly on the back. "Got to chinnin' with Charlie here and we'd of made a night of it if you hadn't showed up. What's the word?"

"Hungry," grinned Bon. "Otherwise normal." Random groaned.

"As a member of the firm of Merriweather, Ord and Random," he said, "and with the common interest in mind, I ought to say this: We'll all go stone broke yet if this young anaconda doesn't throttle down his

appetite. He carried off enough provisions to-day to last a man a week. And here he comes saying he's hungry."

"Let's hope, minion," retorted Bon, headed for the kitchen, "that you obeyed orders and stocked the larder."

"He did," said the old man, trooping along after Bon. "He sure did. Nobody here when I come in, so I sit tight and wait. Charlie comes in pretty late himself, but he has a barley sack half full of grub. Took him an hour to get it sorted to suit him on the shelves or somewhere."

"Good man!" said Bon. "Raise your wages, Random."

He began delving. A moment later he called:

"Say, you didn't get any eggs!"

Random started, seeming astonished at the oversight.

"Do you know, old chap, I believe you're right. I forgot the bally eggs."

"'S all right," said Bon. "Me for some coffee and bacon."

Random stirred uneasily but said nothing. Old Merriweather began to chuckle. Bon, searching high and low, found little to cheer a hungry man.

"How about coffee?" he called. "What about bacon?"

A brief but eloquent, very eloquent, silence.

"Bacon?" said Random at last. "H'm. Coffee? H'm."

"What's all this?" Bon asked, coming upon a fresh shelf.

"Jelly," cried Merriweather. "Jelly and jam! Cuss

me if he didn't have a barley sack full of jams and jellies."

"I must have forgotten some of the other things," admitted Random weakly. "Don't know how they happened to slip my mind, either. I had a list; that is, I started making out a list——"

"Go kill him, King Canute, will you?" pleaded Bon. "Scoop up the remains with a shovel and fling 'em outside. Be sure you shut the door afterwards."

"I'm givin' a wild party, Bon," said his grandfather. "Go ahead and eat and I'll tell you."

Bon found half a loaf of bread, some flinty cheese, and a handful of raisins. Bringing his gleanings with him and making himself comfortable at the table, he said with a sigh:

"Glad you happened to remember the sweets, Johnny Bull. I'll take some along with me in the morning. And now, King Canute, what about this wild party of yours?"

"The wildest party, kid, that was ever pulled off in these here mountains. Wait 'til I show you!"

From his hip pocket he produced a great sheet of paper, folded many a time to make it in the least pocket-able. Beginning to open it up he announced lustily:

"I was goin' to pull this here party right off, but they've stopped me, holdin' me back a bit, sayin' I'm to keep my mouth shut about you bein' in the clear once more. If I was asked to express my opinion, I'd do it, about what I think of any man, sheriff or no sheriff, that would let his son, his only son, by thunder, rest under the cloud! Hmf!"

"So the party's postponed? Let's hear the details just the same. What's it for and who's invited—and

who ever told you that you knew how to give a party, anyhow?"

"Me? When I put on a function there's one thing about it: It's put on right! Yep; it's postponed. It's for you, old Bon Boy! It's a celebration and if I was a swearin' man I'd say one hell of a big celebration. As for who's invited, you just skin back your eyelids and peep at that."

It was a poster, man-sized, home-made and wonderful. Enormous intoxicated looking letters done with black paint on a great square of wrapping paper, it proclaimed to the world:

BIG CELEBRATION!
OVER AT BILL MERRIWEATHER'S RANCH.

A Reglar Wild Party!

In Honor Of

MY GRANDSON
MR. BONBRIGHT ORD.

Every Drinking Man In The World

INVITED

Provided

His Name Aint on This List:

TAKE NOTICE:

MEN NOT INVITED ARE:

There followed a list of not less than forty men. And lo! John Ord's name led all the rest!

Bon burst into rollicking laughter.

"You'll have about forty men to fight before sundown of the day you stick your posters up, and you

know it! Thank the Lord, they've got you to postpone your party!"

"Not so bad, is it?" asked old Merriweather with pride. "Boy, there's goin' to be doin's over at my ranch that folks are goin' to remember. There's goin' to be feastin' and there's goin' to be drinkin'. There'll be cards and there'll be a wheel. Barbecue and everything. Stag dancin' and games. Prizes, kid, that'll wake 'em up! Bronco-bustin', bull-doggin', prize-fightin'; a rip-snortin', rarin'-tearin' devil of a time."

Bon's eyes brightened. Here was merrymaking with a vengeance. And his old grandfather, God love him, was doing it for him; making sure the only way he knew how to advise the world that his grandson, Bonbright Ord, was a gentleman above suspicion and without taint. After he, Bill Merriweather, thus publicly fêted him and honored him, what man would ever dare to dream of connecting Bon Ord with any dark and devious practices?

So Bon, understanding, was warned. But there was something else, and the brightness in his eyes clouded over and, in spite of him, he sighed.

"What's wrong, Bon Boy?" asked the old man anxiously, his own face at one moment aglow, fallen the next.

"You're a king pin, King Canute. Only sometimes I wish. Why is it that you and dad——"

"Don't mention that man's name to me," shouted old Bill, and for the first time to-night went for his beard.

"You've got nothing against him," said Bon stubbornly. "Just as he has nothing against you. You just fly at each other like two old tom cats and for no earthly reason."

"That's enough, kid," snorted the old man. He began rolling up his amazing poster and stuffing it back into his pocket. "We drop the subjec'. We——"

"All you've got to do," said Bon quietly, "is take dad's name off your list of enemies. He wouldn't come anyway, and you know it. So——"

"We dropped the subjec' once, didn't we?" demanded his grandfather sharply. "Now, suppose you give an account of yourself. What you been up to to-day?"

"Enough," said Bon, and told them of Leather Hide's thwarted attack on the fat man, and of the resultant situation, Vickers behind a tree and seeking explanations, with Leather Hide blazing away at him. A situation which old Bill Merriweather found infinitely delightful. He laughed until the tears ran down his weathered cheeks.

"It either one of those jaspers pots the other," he cried, slapping his leg for emphasis, "I'll right away wipe the survivor's name off'n my black list; he'll come to my party and I'll crown him Queen of the May. Wish I'd of been along to see it. Boy, I'd of paid a hundred dollars for a front seat." He began tucking his beard back into his collar. "What about the girl, though, Bon?"

"What girl?" asked Bon innocently. Rather too innocently perhaps, for Random laughed at him.

"Some girl or other, some new dame," said old Bill. "This new pardner we've took on, Ran here, says you've started admirin' some lady-bird at last; askin' him to write pomes and such truck about her."

"This guy Ran," said Bon glaring at him, "is just a hired man, remember. I'm thinking some of firing

him real soon, at that. I give him things to do and he doesn't do 'em. He's no earthly good. Besides, dad would give me a new saddle to run him out of the country."

"Any time he cans you, Ranny," laughed the old man, "just trot over to my place. Anyhow, Bon Boy, I'm relieved to know he got you dead wrong about some girl or other. I was scared it might be that spring chicken of old Leather Hide's. You let girls alone, m' son; all of them are just silly giggle-gaggle geese and man-spoilers. And if it had been a girl of Leather Hide's, well, I'll tell you what she'd be. She——"

"Hold on there, King Canute," cried Bon, a good lively warmth in his bronzed cheeks. "As you said a while ago, let's drop the subject."

"Fair enough." Old Merriweather tipped a wink to Random behind his grandson's back as he went for his hat. "I'm off to my place. I'll be runnin' in on you every night for a spell, Bon Boy, to see if you're still all in one chunk. So long, kid. So long, Ranny, old horse."

They heard him ride away. Random put both arms high up and yawned luxuriously.

"You learned that trick from old Bill," laughed Random. "He's a contagious old sport. Here he comes back for something!"

He had heard some one at the door and supposed that his grandfather was returning for something he had forgotten or to disburden himself of something which he had intended and then neglected to say. The door opened slowly and the fat man, Fancher, peered in.

"Follow your face, Fancher," said Bon, wondering

what brought the man here. "Shut the door from this side."

Fancher looked around, made sure there were but two men in the cabin, focussed his cunning little eyes on Random as though to take careful stock of him, and came in. He was a sight to hold a man's eyes, clothes torn, face scratched, hair rumpled, flabby cheeks pendulous with fatigue. He saw the bottle which Bill Merriweather had left on the table and with a spark of alacrity invited himself to become acquainted with it. He pulled up a chair and sat close to the table. In two minutes he was making circles on the table with a glass bottom.

All the while both Bon and Random had been watching him in silence, waiting for him to explain himself. Fancher puffed out his cheeks, sighed, cast another curious glance at Random and began:

"Take me now, Mr. Ord, I'm a man that's known happier days and I'm a man, Mr. Ord, that's got a heart. And I got appreciation and gratitude; I was raised that way, Mr. Ord. Now, maybe I'm a bad egg some ways and then again maybe there's worse. That ain't the question, I take it?"

"I don't know just what the question is," Bon told him.

"Maybe I am a bad egg, Mr. Ord," went on Fancher, getting his pattern of circles well under way. "But I don't go 'round killing people. I ain't the man to go 'round bashing people's heads in with a sledgehammer." He shuddered; a quivering ripple of flesh seemed to run up over his bulky shoulders. He lifted his free hand, pudgy and very dirty, to rub a forehead about which ran the fiery red mark of his hat band.

"Mr. Ord, this very day you stood between me and my being summoned premature to my Maker. You, like me, have got some of the Brotherhood of Man in you. That's why I'm here, Mr. Ord. I'm grateful and I'm here to say so."

He concluded triumphantly. Of a sudden the man even smiled. To smile, with Mr. Fancher, was merely to tuck the corners of his mouth deep into the pouchy fat of his cheeks.

"Glad I happened to be of service," said Bon dryly.

"So am I," said Fancher. Then he slewed about in his chair to stare with unhidden interest at Bon's companion. "Who's this gentleman, if I might ask?" he queried. "All by way of being polite, Mr. Ord. I'm a stickler for what we call the conventions. Let's be introduced."

Random, with little enough understanding of promiscuous introductions, looked mildly horrified. Bon laughed and gave Fancher his information.

"A friend of mine." And then for the first time he gave Random his title, and added to it for full measure: "Sir Charles Random, T.D."

Fancher's little eyes stretched themselves.

"Listen to that, now! On the level, though, Mr. Ord? 'Sir Charles!' Now do you know, handing you the low-down on it, gents, I've knocked about considerable and I've met men of most kinds, fine men, too; but not until this minute did I ever see, let alone be made acquainted with, a Sir." He rose and bowed and put out his hand, for the moment neglectful even of his circles.

"Shake, Sir Charles," said Fancher.

Random had his hands clasped behind his head—and there he kept them.

"I'd rather not," he said coolly. "Even if you washed."

Fancher only sighed and went back to his chair.

"Don't know that I blame you at that, Sir Charles," he said with equanimity. Obviously, Random rose to new heights in his admiration. "We're not in the same class. You're right. Your health, Sir Charles."

He drank heartily, yet respectfully, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and grew businesslike.

"Now, being on a right footing, I can shoot the works, eh? You done me a favor, Mr. Ord. I'm grateful, like I said. So I try and see if maybe I can do you a kindness. You see, I'm a pretty wise old bird; I've got brains and I've got imagination; like I've told Leather Hide, I'm psychological. In short, gents, I know what's going on! I know that a man name of Delamere was killed; shot down right in this very room. I know that you, Mr. Ord, have been on the jump ever since, account that same unfortunate circumstance. I know that Jim Hyde and his gang tried to hand you over to the law—and didn't. The fact of your tying me up with that same bunch makes no never-mind with Amos Fancher. You was in your rights; besides, you wiped that out this morning. I'm your friend, sir!"

"Thanks," said Bon. "Shoot the rest of your works!"

"Here I come, Mr. Ord; I know those birds was trying to frame you for what they done. I know you didn't kill Delamere; you couldn't; you're like me. We may be bad eggs, but we don't go 'round goring folks! I know why Delamere was popped off; and I come pretty close to knowing who did the pop-off act. It was Hyde himself or else it was Vickers. My notion

is it was the latter, but I wouldn't put it beyond the former. Anyhow, them two was in cahoots. Hyde wanted your money without letting go his land; he'd sell that again. He was willing to split with Vickers. They saw Delamere here and they whanged away in a hurry and they got the wrong man, thinking it was you!"

"How much of this do you *know*, Fancher?" asked Bon sharply. "And how much are you guessing?"

"I know some and I guess some, Mr. Ord. That's the way a man gets hep to what's going on. You can just take it from me, Mr. Ord, that what I do know, added up to what'll be getting found out in time, will be enough to come mighty near hanging one of those devils, I'm afraid," and he sighed, "that it'll work out to be Vickers. Wish it was Hyde." He brightened. "Might be both!"

"Look here, Fancher, you must let me arrange for you to have a talk with my father; the sheriff, you know."

Fancher looked startled and appeared to shrink back in his chair.

"No, you don't!" he said hurriedly. "Not now, anyway. I'm not hobnobbing with officers of the law, Mr. Ord. That ain't my way. I—I don't mind saying that I did get in a bit of trouble back in Seattle and that I'm sort of on the dodge. Oh, it's not such a bad mess at that; I'm too smart a man, Mr. Ord. But there might be trouble; and there might be talk of jail, you know; not the pen, mind you; just a short stretch in jail which ain't so bad in itself as being an obstacle. It heads a man off from what he's after; it corks up his activities, so to speak, Mr. Ord.

"And I ain't half told you what I'm here to tell, either. Now you know Jim Hyde as well as I do; maybe better. And you know what his line of business is. And you know he's a big rum runner and alongside that he does another line of business. And you know how he gets his wet goods, coming down the coast and landing at a certain place by night and carting it off to one place and another. And maybe you know that it's getting time for another shipment?"

"Well?" prompted Bon.

Fancher leaned closer and looked very knowing; crafty and shrewd and anything but kindly.

"It's my notion the boat will stop to unload inside a week or so. At that, instead of unloading, it'll take something on. And that will be Jim Hyde on the run for some other place! Vickers? Maybe him, too! I don't know so well about Vickers."

"Well?" demanded Bon again. "Why should I care if those two decide to cut loose and drift?"

Fancher bestowed a look of mild surprise upon him.

"A man don't want to go through life under suspicion of something another guy did, does he? I ask you, Mr. Ord. And what show have you got coming clean if they don't nail this Delamere business to the man that pulled it off? Another thing, too: I guess you're real keen about that girl, ain't you?"

"What girl?" Bon snapped at him, innocently as before and feeling Random's amused eyes on him.

"Jim Hyde's girl, of course," chuckled the fat man. "Not that she *is* his girl, come right down to it. The girl, Mr. Ord, that you had such a nice picnic with to-day! The one you're going to have your sister Ann be good to. The one that just eats you up with both

eyes, reg'lar, hungry style, when you ain't noticing! That's the girl, Mr. Ord!"

In amazement Bon heard him through. For the bewildered moment he found never a word to say. He could only ask himself how on earth Fancher knew.

Fancher enlightened him.

"Heard you tell her they'd never find you there by the creek, it being a swell hiding-place! It sure is, Mr. Ord. Only I found it first." He gave vent to a series of his oily chuckles. "I was about nine jumps ahead of you at the start, and I kept travelling, believe me! I went up that creek like a cat up a tree. I found me my place and crawled in—and here you and her comes! For a minute I thought it was that devil Hyde, and I tell you the truth, Mr. Ord, I pretty near died right then! Now I ain't saying I ain't a brave man, too; I got to be in my line of business. But times I get scared; and when I'm scared, why, for a spell I ain't quite so brave." A vast sigh seemed to break loose with difficulty somewhere deep down in the depths of him and to work its way with continued difficulty upward, at last setting the lamp flame flickering. "I was real glad to make out it was only you two," he concluded.

"And you lay there all the time—listening——"

"And watching," nodded Fancher. "And thinking. And after a while I guess I went to sleep."

Bon got up and looked in various places in the room for tobacco and papers; finally finding them in his pocket, he made himself a cigarette. Once again he said, "Well?" and then ran on to demand: "You imply that you know something about—about the young lady. Not Hyde's daughter, you said. What else do you know?"

"That it's time for me to be on my way," said Fancher, suddenly brisk, and stood up. "I've come to do you a favor and I guess I've done it. Later on, maybe, I'll see you again. Meantime I got my own job on my hands. Night, Mr. Ord."

He turned to Random and made as deep a bow as a man of his build could.

"Good night, Sir Charles," he said graciously. "I'm proud, Sir Charles, to know you, sir."

CHAPTER XVII

EVENING. Bon's cabin. A week later.

"Minion!" called Bon out of a silence.

Random, busy with pencil and paper, did not turn.

"Slave!" Bon sang out.

Random began going over certain figures, checking them.

"Bean! Old bean; jelly-bean!" Bon flung at him. "I say there, Random, come alive!"

"Ah," said Random, looking up as though about to be bored. "I thought you were addressing yourself. Can't you see I'm busy?"

"Take dictation," said Bon. "Ready, Mr. Secretary? You're to write some letters."

"Ducks?" asked Random.

"Swans. Black and white, mostly white. And fancy ones if they come fancy."

"About a thousand, I suppose," said Random. He spoke abstractedly. Already his mind was wandering back to the figures.

"You're to get instruction books, you know," Bon went serenely on. "You're to be the trainer. You can boost your wages again to take care of the additional labor. By the way, what salary are you drawing now, General Manager?"

"Ah," said Random. "Train swans, is it? We'll add fifty dollars to my salary, old pill. I'll teach 'em to swim."

"T.D.!" jeered Bon. "Terry-Diddle!"

Random reddened. Ann had not been able to keep that to herself, that delightful, explosive "Terry-Diddle!" from her father. She revelled in it; so did Bon. Random alone merely reddened.

"Teach 'em to pull a boat, that's what, old bean," said Bon. "You will get the boat first; it's to be something—well, just wonderful, I guess. Something that will go well with swans, you know, and——"

"A little princess riding in it? Oh, of course. To be sure. She will travel in state across the placid bosom of the lake——"

"Lake Aurora!"

"Regular fairy queen stuff. I say, Bon, where's the nearest good bank?"

"Bank? What on earth? Want to buy one?"

"I've sold my stuff at home——"

"Bicycle, shotgun, fishing tackle and all?" grinned Bon. "Want a bank now; next to buy the rest of old Leather Hide's land?"

Random, with skill remaining from old school days, made a piece of yellow paper in front of him into a craft to sail the air, and sped it across the room to Bon.

"Feast your eyes on that, little man," he said with satisfaction.

Bon read the brief cabled message upon a Western Union form. It informed Sir Charles Random that twenty-seven thousand pounds awaited his pleasure in a Seattle bank. Bon lay back in his chair, let the yellow paper flutter to the floor, and gasped.

"You snake!" he snorted. "Creeping into my bosom under false pretenses, pretending to be broke—and having a whole lot over a hundred thousand dollars stuck away!"

"I was only trying to make something by my own effort," said Random stiffly. "These other funds came to me otherwise——"

But Bon interrupted him with a sudden burst of glee.

"And dad swears you're trying to marry money!" he chortled.

Random frowned. There was always a confounded fly in the ointment.

"It's a whale of a lot of money, Snake," said Bon curiously. "On the level, are you wanting to drive your stake here in this country?"

"Haven't I told you so all along?"

"And I thought you Britishers were slow! Well, go talk it over with King Canute. He has a long head on him."

"I have done so. This morning."

"What did he suggest?"

"Poker!" grunted Random. "And meant it, too!"

"Meant it?" cried Bon. "You can bet your boots and sundries he meant it. He's well enough heeled to play with you; he'd put up everything he's got against your pile—and rip your hide clean off you before he was done."

"I've played poker a time or two in my life," retorted Random. "It's a good game. Give me an opponent who just plays fair——"

"Fair?" gurgled Bon. "What are you talking about? King Canute play fair with you in a game of poker? Man, he plays to win!"

"You're dead wrong, Bon, and ought to be ashamed of yourself. Bill Merriweather is a good sport and a gentleman."

"Gentleman? Rats! Let Bill hear you say that

and he'll fight you! He's a roughneck and a robber and— Told dad yet?"

Random didn't answer. Instead he began to muse and, forgetful of Bon's presence, sighed. He liked John Ord; he couldn't help it. The man was as naturally likable as his son Bon; almost as likable as his daughter Ann would have been had she been merely a man. He was square and forthright and above-board; what Random recognized from the first as a man of honor. One whose friendship it was a privilege to share. And though these latter days circumstance had forced the two to see each other often, a film of ice lay over their relationship. For John Ord, along with his manful fine qualities, was as human a being as ever wore boot-leather. It is rather more than to be suspected that there ran a strong vein of pure rank jealousy in the man. Before now there had been young fellows to look at Ann more than once, and not a member of their number that John Ord did not trump up reasons to hoot at. And this time, to make matters immeasurably worse, Ann's mother was altogether too fond of teasing and toasting Sir Charles.

Random had ridden to him with messages from Bon. All that the fat man had told them must be repeated to the sheriff; Bon's own various suspicions must go to headquarters. Random was the courier. Then Bon, too, had needed to communicate with Ann. Random, gladly assisting, bringing her one late afternoon to the cabin and a meeting with her brother, had run the gauntlet again that day of John Ord's extremely frank eyes.

"I actually believe dad's having all sorts of enquiries made about you, Sir Charles," laughed Ann. "He's

dead set on finding something shady in your past, so look out! He's sure, or wants to be, and that's the same thing with him, that you're an all 'round fake, title and everything."

"What did I ever do to him?" groaned Random.

"Well, if you ask what *I* think about it," said Ann, "you were rather too nice to mama!"

But here Ann left him to speculate, her thoughts upon Bon and his message to her. Interest keenly piqued, brimming with eager curiosity, she made Bon stand and deliver to the last shred of news. Much that he would have held back his little sister Ann wormed out of him. Bon had expected interest, but was altogether unprepared for such a whirlwind of it.

Ann herself could not have told just which element of many mixed here snared first her leaping fancies. Mystery was here, proclaiming itself like a clarion, inviting investigation. Romance peeped out at her from almost the first word. This at a time when each new day thrilled her. Bon, funny old Bon, girl-dodging Bon, was in love at last. There was no deceiving Ann on that score. There was danger in the offing, with terrible men on the edge of it all and questions flying about like fireflies in a dark wood.

"Not old Jim Hyde's girl at all!" Whose, then? And why this state of affairs? Clearly they cried for Ann's own hand in adjustment. What was she like, really? How old was she? When could Ann see her? Where could they meet? And what about the poor young mother? What had old Doc Cuttle to say about her? Did he know anything? And about the emeralds, how many did Bon think there were, and where hidden and would they ever be found?

Ann, with no end of questions remaining unanswered, saw Titania. Bon arranged the meeting and Titania, in her own secret dressing-room somewhere in the forest, put on her best dress; the little garment that Bon remembered; he called it her fairy dress. In a hidden glade not far from the shore of Bon's lake they met secretly and spent a long golden afternoon. Ann, brimming with happiness herself, deliciously in love herself, wanted all the world in a like seraphic state. Her swift appraisal of the lonely girl found Titania breathless, hoping and fearing; her sudden whole-hearted acceptance of her as adorable put a sudden dash of tears into Titania's wistful gray eyes, shining, glinting tears of happiness.

Then they had a picnic, the four of them, Random being admitted to their conspiring number. For conspiracy was rampant already, injected by Ann, who saw ten thousand adventurous possibilities where one existed. Random came in a critical mood; he began to take Bon seriously as though already adopted into his family, and felt a responsibility. He saw Titania, watched her, approved.

"She is quite charming," said Random. "Really."

"Really!" snorted Bon. "Charming? You idiot!"

As if it were any business of Random's. As if there were any words Random might stumble upon to apply to her that were not merely insulting through their very inadequacy. Let Random look at her—from a distance. But he had best refrain from comment. Even to say that she was "nice" made Bon want to punch the man; as if she weren't everything desirable that came after and beyond niceness. Had Random said, "Lovely—perfect—wonderful!" it would

have been the same. She was so much more than all that!

"I must make you another song, Savage. 'No girl's shadow——'"

"If I happened to know a cannibal king," said Bon, "I'd have you delivered at his back door in time for breakfast."

Ann, on their homeward ride, was a star apart from their masculine world. She shone upon them distantly and dimly when they spoke to her; her queer little smile was, in so far as they were concerned, as aloof as herself, entirely impersonal and divinely abstracted. Her own small orbit, sprinkled generously with the star dust of her new thoughts, sufficed her. Latterly, she had found the world perfect; being Ann she was setting her pretty head, home of quick wits and loving impulses, to make perfection some degrees still more perfect. A little extra touch to the lily and the rose was work for Ann.

She had been queen of this bright sunny summer afternoon; how willingly had Queen Titania herself yielded her sceptre that little Queen Ann might dictate! Ann had driven the men to lunch preparations; she had taken Titania to herself and to her motherly young bosom. In ten minutes the two whispering girls had talked two hours' worth. Both at once, both asking, neither fully answering, each gleaning all the knowledge that she wanted full-handedly. Magic, to be sure, and nothing less; feminine magic. They had raced backward, hurdling years with fine unconcern of the dignity of time; they had leaped ahead into the future, disposing of persons, conditions and other mere side issues very serenely and very competently. And, prac-

tical at times, they had even arranged for future meetings. Of this final matter Bon and Random knew nothing.

Not all of the Ord folly was monopolized by Bon. Ann had her own beckoning impulses after which she ran full tilt. A delectable path glimpsed, she tripped along it without very much worrying as to what bugaboo might be hidden around the first turn. Now, she admitted to herself, she was scared out of her wits of old Leather Hide and his hangers-on; they were ogres in the wood. Yet she saw her path leading into the wood of ogres and straight ahead went Ann.

Her mother and father saw little of her these days. "Where's Ann?" "Oh, off somewhere. Seeing a girl friend, I believe." And so she was, visiting with Titania in the leafy seclusion offered them by the forest near the lake shore.

This time they met in the dusk, tender hour still holding all the warmth and fragrance of the day, time of hush and serenity, at once reminiscent and expectant, remembering the glory of the departed sunlight, harkening breathlessly to the promise of the stars.

"I have come to take you with me," said Ann straightway. "You are going home with me to spend the night. And to know mother and dad."

"Oh!" said Titania.

To go with Ann to her own home! To know her mother and father—Bon's mother and father. Ann had been so good to her, Bon so good——

"I couldn't sleep last night," said Ann, "just for worrying about you. Alone 'way out here with those terrible men. And— Do you ever have premonitions, Titania?"

"Of course!" said Titania.

"Of course," Ann nodded sagely. "We can tell when things are going to happen, I think."

She employed the feminine "we." All males tacitly excluded from this clairvoyant prevision. Men sometimes indulged clumsily in what they termed "hunches"; blind procedure, groping without wings. "We" had premonitions.

"Haven't you felt lately—even since I saw you—that there was something in the air?"

This time it was Titania's curly head that nodded. The two looked at each other with eyes which grew more and more sober. The very hour itself conspired with them, mystic, making grotesqueries among the trees. They stood closer together; from looking into each other's grave eyes they began glancing all about them.

"Something dreadful is going to happen," whispered Ann. "I lay awake last night, just *feeling* it! So you are coming home with me. My horse will carry double; we'll ride as far as Bon's cabin and get a horse there for you. Maybe Bon and—and— Anyway, maybe Bon will be there and ride with us. It will be dark."

Titania was tempted.

"I'd like to go. Oh, more than anything in the world." Then she glanced swiftly down at her skirt, her shoes. "But I am not dressed——"

"I'll lend you something," said Ann.

"I have been making a new dress," Titania continued. "Like the one you wore that first day, only blue. I've been saving the cloth for a long time. And we may meet some one on the way—your brother——"

"Yes," said Ann. "That's so. Where are your

things, Titania? At the house or where you had your other dress hidden?"

"At the house. In my secret room."

Ann knew all about the secret room, and had known from the first hour of knowing Titania.

"Is any one there now?" she asked.

"I don't think so. We could see from the edge of the wood. You could wait there and I could slip in and out. I'd be only a minute."

It was quite dark when they came to the edge of the wood; already the first handful of stars had been flung into the sky. The house stood silent and dark.

"There is no one there," whispered Ann. "I am going with you."

She was atingle with curiosity. To come to the very door of the ogre's home, to find him away—to shiver a little, perhaps, and to go on and investigate.

No evil-doers could have crept more stealthily than they did into this house of evil. They spoke only in whispers; they clung to each other. They did not analyze, either of them; they merely felt. Frightened, each added to the other's fright. They had begun, back there in the dusk, cloaking their thoughts in forebodings.

Just within the dark hall they listened breathlessly. Then they went forward on tiptoe. Titania found and lighted a candle. They looked about awesomely. As the candle moved, ever so slightly, great black shadows crept and little shadows ran.

"Here is my room," said Titania. She led the way into that room in which she had sat that other night, listening to the men talking, Fancher hinting, all waiting for Bon Ord.

With the closed door at her back Ann looked about her with curiosity, then interest, finally pity. What a poor, bare little room it was; how little of home in it, how innocent it was of true cosiness. One felt its atmosphere. A few flowers in a cracked cup; a dozen books on the table. A place for tired, yearning Titania to throw herself down and sleep; a place to sit in the dark, listening——

“Your secret room?” asked Ann. “Your things are up there?”

A secret room only because none had ever thought to look for it, made her own exclusively by Titania when but a very little girl. She had found that by standing on the tall old-fashioned bureau she could reach up to the planks of the ceiling, that the planks could be forced upward, that up there was an attic, so low under the squat roof that one could scarcely stand erect even when a very little girl. But it was a haven. Without leaving the house, in the bleak wintry days, she could steal up here and be alone. With the boards replaced, none would think to look here for her. Here were her home-made dolls, left over from her lonely childhood; dolls that she had always known Leather Hide would have guffawed at. She saved them—and herself—that.

Now, giving Ann the candle, she put a chair by the dresser and climbed up. Lifting two broad planks aside she pulled herself up and crawled through into the attic. Then she reached down for the candle and Ann, preparing to follow her, turned with sudden impulse and ran back to bolt the door. But half, or less, of her mind was actually given to the act; she was thinking of so many other things. What a natural

thing to do, to shoot a bolt on a door when one would be unmolested by any chance comer; what a trifling thing!

Titania, leaning down and holding the candle for her, helped her up. Ann looked about with a fresh rush of interest. They had to crouch, not to brush their curly heads against cobwebs. They replaced the planks which served the room below as ceiling and this cramped space as floor and went forward tip-toe. Again big black shadows ringed them about, withdrawing as they went forward, creeping after them. The planking creaked dismally under the lightest foot-fall.

"I'm glad I came for you!" said Ann. "More than ever I'm glad I'm going to take you away. Let's hurry, Titania. Where are your things?"

"At the other end of the attic," said Titania. "At the far end; there's more air and light there. I'll be only a minute."

They went forward amid attendant sinister shadows, noiselessly save for the occasional startling complaint of the planking.

"I wish I hadn't fastened that door," said Ann of a sudden. "If any one did come and try it, it would just tell that we are here."

"I'll hurry," whispered Titania.

She had to stoop under the rafters to come to the old dry-goods box, which, with a curtain over it, constituted her depository for sundry of her few cherished belongings. The new blue dress, put carefully away in the wrapping of an old newspaper, a pair of stockings, her best shoes.

"I can slip them on in no time——"

Ann was at a stage where she began to fancy she heard things.

"No," she urged. "Let's go! Bring them with you. Oh——"

They grew rigid. Somewhere below a door opened. A man's heavy boots, clumping along hurriedly, came from the back toward the front of the house. Again they did not analyze; they did not ask why they were afraid; they did not attempt to specify to themselves what it was that they feared. But, white-faced, they stared wildly at each other.

Ann, holding the candle again, did not feel the hot dripping of melted grease on her hand. Titania, confronted by no condition which in itself was new, came closer and blew out the tiny flame.

"There are cracks everywhere between the planks," she whispered, her lips close to Ann's ear. "Whoever it is would see the light up here."

"Who is it?"

Scarcely breathing, they stood motionless. Leather Hide, doubtless. But would he come and go? Would he look for Titania? Would he go to her door? Would he get something that he had come for and then go away? Or was it Leather Hide after all? Vickers? The fat man? One of the others? It might be any one. Why, it might even be Bon—good old Bon——

The man, whoever he was, came on into the room directly below them. He stopped once and was quite still for several moments. Why? they asked themselves in swift, if vague, alarm. Why should any man stand still in a dark house? Why didn't he light a match? Why not get a lamp or a candle?

He appeared in no haste of either. Presently he

moved again; he, too, seemed stealthy, going about quietly. And still in the pitch dark. It was impossible to tell what he was doing. He grew still again; stirred again. He was not aimlessly knocking about in the dark; he went purposefully and, though guardedly, with considerable swiftness. Another little sound now, like the creaking of rusty hinges. He was closing all the heavy wooden shutters at the windows.

The house grew still again. Then there was the scratch and sputter of a match and he called sharply:

"Tanny! Tanny, where are you? Come here, girl!"

It was Leather Hide. They knew from the tone of his voice that he did not expect to have it answered. He was merely making sure. He wanted the house to himself; he wanted to be assured, by the silence following his call, that he was alone.

He did not call again. Lighting the lamp on the table, he went to the two doors of the room and closed both, turning a key in each. Then he went back to the table. They heard the scraping of the chair he pulled out, the soft sound of his body relaxing into it.

The two girls, having stood rigid all this while, settled down where they were, Titania's little bundle in her arms, Ann's fingers squeezing the unlighted candle tight. Yellow cracks of light from the lamp below lined the floor under them. Crouching close to the planking they could peer down at the man in the chair.

He began muttering to himself. Titania, knowing him, knew something of his frame of mind. He was gripped by some black, savage mood. Something had gone wrong with him—or he was going to make something go wrong for someone else.

They could see him quite clearly and, even though they looked down upon him, could watch his face, since he sat at the far end of the room, back to wall, fronting toward them. They saw him put out a clenched hand, resting it on the table. The emerald in his ring shone softly in the lamplight, a cool, tender, translucent green, rich and vivid.

Ugly and sullen and dogged was the look on Leather Hide's face; cold, congested fury in his staring eyes. His lids did not move, did not once even fleetingly curtain that steady, baleful glare of his wide opened eyes; yet he was not seeing anything material, neither the walls about him nor yet even the stone on his finger. It was the gaze which, turned outward, looks through the walls themselves to something menacing without; or, turned inward, is fastened on the ugly shapes writhing within the man's own brain. His fist, tight shut, clenched tighter.

After a while the expression on his face began to change, to soften slowly. He had seen the emerald. He turned his hand slowly, playing with the gleams darting out from it. Its rays, cool and clear and softly brilliant, encountered the lights in his hot eyes. His hand began relaxing; from head to foot the man himself relaxed. It was as though the gem were a little green forest pool, and the feverish soul of the man bathed itself in it refreshingly. They heard his sigh, long, deep, with something of a shudder in it.

He took out pipe and tobacco box. He filled the pipe, picking out the shreds of tobacco with his long fingers. Then, very swift and silent, he went to the door, unlocked it, whipped it open. Here he stood listening, peering out into the dark. Now again he

began muttering. He closed and locked the door again and went back to his chair. To his chair and his pipe which he did not light; to his tobacco-box.

They watched him clawing at the tobacco, which was evidently tight-packed, and pouring it out upon the oil-cloth. Now and then he would jerk his head up, twisting it about upon his long, lean neck; more like a vulture than ever.

He thrust the little heap of tobacco spillings aside, tilted his box upside down, tapped it gently—and poured out on the table into the lamp's circle a cascade of gleaming, glowing, scintillating effulgence, a coruscation of glimmering, lambent flames, a little radiant heap of what seemed the essence of cool green lambent light. And he sat, with both long arms out on the table about the pool of treasure, as though at any moment he would draw it to his breast, hugging it against him.

Again the look on his face altered, swiftly now. He forgot the walls about him, the outside night, whoever it was—the world?—that he had locked his doors and closed his shutters against. He saw nothing, thought of nothing, breathed nothing but the glory of his jewels. A great love shone in his eyes, a strange love, an all-excluding love. A grotesque and misshapen and abnormal love, perhaps; yet love it was. The love of one who gives nothing beyond that love itself; who wants all and finds all in the beloved object. The love, if you like, of a flaming emir for his latest slave girl, gloating in her very purity though it shrink back in horror from the hideous things she sensed back of the unwinking eyes. The one single passion of Leather Hide's life stamped itself upon his face for any one to

read. "My children? These are my children—my jewels!"

It was not mere gloating. It was rapture.

There was a little sound. Such a sound as may be heard at any time in an old house. Leather Hide started, swept together the little heap of gems, poured them back into their receptacle, packed the little bit of rag down on them with rushing fingers, filled in the tobacco——

Another sound, one now like the clap of doom. A pistol shot exploding upon startled nerves like a cannon. Leather Hide started and flung out his hand. The lamp at his elbow was knocked to the floor. The light went out, black dark shut in again. The third sound was that of a body slipping from its chair, thudding to the floor. Silence then. Silence, and a terrible darkness.

CHAPTER XVIII

SICK with horror, the two girls pressed close together so that one trembling body felt the other shaken with a spasm of shuddering. Beyond that instinctive leaning together neither moved. Neither, at that moment, could have moved or cried out to save her life.

That terrible stillness! Would it last on through all eternity? And the dark!

A sudden sharp noise, sounding unnaturally loud in their ears, broke the silence. A step below? A hand at a door? A shutter being torn down? A brief space of silence followed; then the sound of steps. Certainly more than one man. A chair toppled over; a moment of confusion; a stifled oath, a second man's mutter. A hush was over all that they did down there below. A period of groping; one could feel that there in the dark they groped. A voice in a harsh, vibrant whisper:

"Got it?"

A palpitant silence. Out of the silence another harsh whisper:

"Yes!"

How inevitably they sank their voices to whispers! They, like Leather Hide before them, must judge the house empty save for themselves—and that which lay at their feet. Yet they spoke in whispers. Had they been in the middle of a desert, at the top of a mountain, far out on a lonely sea, they would have whispered.

"Who's got it?"

"I have. Let's beat it."

Some one, the man who had suggested flight, no doubt, hurried across the room. A key turned, a door opened. He went down the hall. Hastily another man followed. And yet another? And another still? How many of them?

And never a match struck, never a gleam of light. Who wanted eyes of the flesh to see that which lay sprawled on the floor? There are times when one sees with other eyes. There are sights which may not be shut out, no matter into what midnight they are plunged.

Titania tried to rise. Ann pulled her down.

"Wait! Listen!"

Another door opened at the back of the house. The men went out without speaking. One of them closed the door softly after them.

Titania and Ann gripped each other tighter than ever, straining their ears for some further sound. It came almost immediately; the disturbance of horses churning about as men no doubt mounted; that and a scurry of hoofbeats.

In haste the two began groping their way back to the spot where boards were to be lifted that they might go down. Ann still carried the useless candle, unconscious that she gripped it in her trembling fingers. They had brought no second match with them. Louder, more fearsomely than ever did the planks creak and moan under them. They stopped almost at every step, cowering and shrinking back at the noise they themselves made.

"Oh, we must hurry! If they should come back——"

"They'll not come back——"

"Hush! Listen. They are coming back. *They've heard us!*"

They knew that they had not been heard; an impossibility. Yet hoofbeats rang out as though pounded into their brains; be the reason what it might, those men were returning. They had forgotten something, maybe; dropped something——

And now here they came, back into the house. The quick steps of several men, two at least, three or four. Straight to the room where just now Leather Hide had sat at his table, behind locked doors and closed shutters. How little his precautions had availed him!

And now, suddenly, there was light. A man struck a match, found the lamp where it had rolled, and lighted it. Oddly enough, not even the chimney was broken. And a voice, at last done with whispers, but low-pitched, spoke.

"I tell you, you infernal set of nervous fools, we've got to make sure. Not a man of you would ever sleep sound again *unless he knew!*"

It was Vickers. Titania, for one, was not surprised. A thousand times she had seen hate and envy, lust and murder peeping out of Vickers's evil eyes, moulding his cruel, thin lips. They came back to make sure—of what? That they had done their work thoroughly and well? That they had left nothing behind to tell against them?

"You're gettin' jumpy," growled another man. Mike Brady's voice now. "God! What a mess——"

"I'm playing safe," snapped Vickers. "Five minutes does it. Where's another light? Get a candle."

They found candles in the kitchen and lighted two.

"Through every room now, and look everywhere," commanded Vickers.

"I tell you, if he hadn't known he was alone in the house, he wouldn't——"

"Some men make mistakes," said Vickers hotly. "Not me. Get a move on, you lumps. Tony, come alive, man."

Tony jabbered under his breath in his own native tongue. And then added:

"Come alive? Not him! Look— Agh!"

"In his pocket all the time, the hell-dog!" said Vickers. "In that old tobacco-box—I've had my hands on it and never guessed! Well, shake a leg, you staring fools. Every room and every corner in the house, I tell you. Get busy."

Carrying the lamp, Vickers went toward the hall. Quick whispering voices behind him; he turned sharply. The two Italians, Marco and Tony, whispering excitedly.

"Well?" snapped Vickers. "What's the idea?"

"Nothin'," grunted Marco, "Me an' Tony say same thing: Nobod' here. We like go——"

"Nobody here? Let's hope not," said Vickers coolly. "How do we know though? If there happened to be one man hid somewhere knowing what's happened, he'd hang the four of us. Got that? Hang the four of us, I tell you! Where's the girl? We *think* she's off somewhere. Maybe she ain't! The fat man, Fancher; he might be hiding somewhere; he's had his eyes on Leather Hide's stuff. You fools! Anybody *might* be around; Bon Ord, for all we know; John Ord himself. Now, ransack the house and step lively. And no more whispering in corners, you two dagos."

"That's so," said Mike Brady. "We better watch our eye now. G-G-God! What a mess——"

Vickers carried his light into the hall. The two girls in the attic knew when he stopped, looking up and down. Ann, half fainting, whispered: "Oh, why did I bolt the door!"

Vickers, finding that door confronting him, went straight to it. On the instant that his hand found how its panel refused to yield he called sharply, a new note in his voice, the note of electric alarm:

"Come here! All of you. This door's locked!"

In the candle light the whites of their eyes glistened as they looked at one another. They came with a rush.

"Hold the lamp," Vickers commanded. Then stepped back and drove his boot heel against the door near the knob. Half the savage force he put into the effort would have sufficed; wood splintered, lock yielded, and the way was open.

"Give me the light!" snapped Vickers. He held it high in his left hand. His revolver was in his right. He was taking chances and was cool enough to know it. But there was nothing left to do. At every instant he expected the doorway to be raked with bullets.

He stepped into the room, casting the light into the last corner. Empty.

"Look under the bed. Everywhere."

Like slaving hounds they ran into the room, looking in impossible places.

"Nobod'," said Marco.

"Why the locked door?" Vickers asked sharply.

"Bolted; from the inside!"

"There's a window——"

"Shut tight!"

"Not fastened, though."

"No," said Vickers heavily. "Not fastened. She could have jumped out and— Around the house, you gobs o' meat, you dough-heads! On the jump. Let that girl go clear, I tell you, and the four of us hang!"

"I didn't d-do the shootin'," muttered Mike Brady. "And I didn't pot Delamere——"

"You'd hang it on me, wouldn't you?" sneered Vickers impatiently. "You'd take your share of the clean-up, not of the pay? Well, you're crazy! The law puts us all in the same boat. One hang, all hang. Got that? Now get busy!"

They surged out of the room, two of them through the window. They ran about, up and down, more like hounds than ever. Through the house, two of them, one out at the front, one at the back.

"Now!" whispered Ann. "Oh, it's our one chance!"

"They won't go far—they'll be back——"

One of them had not gone far and was already back, Vickers, tip-toeing in from the front. Quietly as he came, still they could hear him. He stood in the doorway; the lamp in his hands thrust yellow fingers upward through the cracks between the planks.

But Vickers was not looking upward; not yet. He was looking about the room, more searchingly than ever. Never keener in his life, now that his life itself was the stake he played for, he marked details and made them talk with him. Scant furniture; bed, table, bureau and a single chair. The table stood at the bedside. The chair stood against the bureau. It was no place for the chair to be; it was in the way of the drawers.

There were candle drippings on the floor. A drop

here, one there; another yonder. A little trail of them. A drop of grease on the chair itself. Vickers came closer. There were spots of hectic color in his cheeks, his nostrils flared, his eyes were terrible in their intensity.

There were candle drippings on the bureau. On its top. Vickers looked up at the ceiling. A moment later he was at the window, calling softly. The men came running back.

Mutely they interrogated. Mutely he answered. Just a thumb jerked upward—indicating the planks above. Silently he handed the lamp to Marco. Then he stepped to the chair, to the old bureau and lifted his hands to the planks above. He had to stoop, not to strike his head on the low ceiling.

He had expected the planks to yield easily. Instead, they did not budge.

"You're crazy," said Mike Brady nervously. "Nobody could get up there."

Vickers was not so easily satisfied. He exerted greater pressure. And now the plank did yield—but heavily, sluggishly, unnaturally. It was free and still weighted down——

"She's standing on it!" cried Vickers.

He straightened, got this shoulder and both hands against the board and pushed it upward and, with a sudden jerk, to one side. Ann, who had stood on this one while Titania at her side put her own slight weight upon the other, was thrown stumblingly. Vickers's hand shot through, groping about. It touched Titania's ankle and, with a little moan of fear, she drew back. Vickers shoved the second plank out of his way.

"Come down!"

It was no longer like the voice of Ralph Vickers; it was not like the voice of any man she had ever heard. Some new quality, some deadlier note had crept into it.

"No!" cried Titania, her own voice unrecognizable, all but overpowered as she was with a sensation of strangulation. "No. Go away!"

Ann sat where she had fallen, dizzy and sick and strengthless. She saw the opening that Vickers had made, the light gushing up from the lamp below. She saw Titania's white, stricken face. She watched Vickers's hand. And then she saw that where the hand had led the way Vickers himself would follow. His head and shoulders came through. Then of a sudden she heard Titania cry out:

"Get back! I'll come down!"

For Titania, even in her terror, had seen two things clearly: One was that, whether she willed it or not, they could bring her down. The other was that they need not know of Ann. They would not think to look. Ann would be left free. Ann could go for help.

"I'm coming down," said Titania, and gestured to Ann to be still.

"Down you come, then," said Vickers and withdrew.

At the last moment Titania hesitated. She was afraid to go down!

"Hurry," said Vickers, curt and angry. "Next time I bring you down."

"Yes. Yes; I'm coming."

Afraid to descend but now more afraid to refuse, she cast one wild look at Ann, she put her very soul

into her eyes; she pleaded and cautioned; she gestured again for silence—and then summoned all her strength and called upon the last dregs of her courage, yielded to the inevitable and came down. Hands locked hard together in front of her, by an effort of will holding herself up, she looked about her at the four faces which looked back so strangely into hers.

"And now," said Vickers, "we'll have the other one down!"

He had given no hint that he knew, that he had seen the other small figure crouching in the attic's gloom. The other men, from staring with their white faces at Titania, looked at him wonderingly.

"The other one?" gasped Mike Brady. There was sweat on Brady's brow, gleaming in the lamplight. "Wh—what other one?"

"You'll see," snapped Vickers. "*Come down!*"

Ann tottered to her feet, stood swaying—and obeyed. Still gripping her candle, as though she must cling tight to something and there was nothing else, she followed Titania. The two girls drew close together, their arms about each other.

"Anna Ord!" grunted Marco, a man bewildered.

Vickers looked at the two girls strangely. He was white; the white of his eyes, the white of his teeth were scarcely more colorless than his face now. The hectic spots were gone. He stood silent. He began to moisten his lips.

"It's too bad," he said. "It can't be helped—now. Marco! You are the man——"

Marco, too, was wetting his lips. He began gnawing at the end of his mustache. He nodded, drew a step nearer, glanced swiftly over his shoulder.

A scream burst from Ann. She covered her face with both hands. Titania's lips parted; the cry died in her throat. There was no misunderstanding.

"The two of us Marco. Together. You and me!"

Tony drew off; backed toward the door. He was going out. Mike Brady stood where he was but for a moment shut his eyes, grimacing, his face horrible as the muscles puckered upward. He could not shut his eyes tight enough; he could not shut out the faces of the two girls——

"G—God!" he gasped. His eyes flew wide open. They would not stay closed. "Vickers!"

"Shut up, you fool! They've seen everything, heard everything. I can't help that, can I? I don't like the job, do I?"

Marco, meaning to make an end swiftly, jerked up his weapon. Brady leaped in on him and struck his arm down.

"No! You two are drunk—crazy— I'm sick! There's been enough——"

"Crazy? Fool, you're the crazy one. We'll hang, I tell you; God knows we'll hang. Not just me; the four of us."

Tony from the door called thickly:

"Mike!" And beckoned him to follow.

"Let us go!" cried Titania. And jerked her hands down from her face. "We won't tell what we saw— what we heard— We— Oh! you won't shoot us—you can't——"

"Vickers!" pleaded Mike Brady. His words failed him. He was beginning to retch; a deathly pallor spread sickly over his already blanched face.

"By God!" roared Vickers, now in towering rage, a

rage voluntarily welcomed and augmented; a rage of which Vickers drank thirstily, filling his veins with it as a man fills his brain with alcohol, goading himself to a deed of horror. "You damned fool, the sheriff would be after us in an hour—*Marco!*"

"Wait!" shrieked Brady. "T—take a minute. You yourself just now said it paid to take a minute. G—God, I'm sick!—Wait, I tell you. I've got something to say——"

"Say it then! Quick!"

"The sheriff, you said! It won't be long until he finds what we leave here. He's keeping his eye on this place. If he finds—her; if— You fool, don't you know John Ord? We could hide in hell and he'd have us out again. The four of us."

Vickers looked to Marco. Marco nodded.

"Wait, I tell you!" yelled Brady.

"Still, you fool! Anybody a mile off would hear you!"

"They'll hear the pistol shots farther! And I haven't finished. If you've got to—to do any more killing, you can do it later. We're on the run now anyway. We take these girls with us. If we go clear of the country, we don't need to kill them, do we? And if Ord comes up with us— Can't you see it, man? We've got his girl! We'll hold her over his head. He'll let us go. It's our one best bet, man!"

Vickers stood frowning, uncertain. He looked at Marco; Marco was stupidly staring back at him.

"I tell you, I'm the only one of you that's got any sense," cried Brady wildly. "If this has got to be done, it don't need to be done right here and right now, does it? It can be done back in the mountains. If it

has got to be done, we needn't leave anything to show. We can't stop here to hide anything, can we?"

Still Vickers stood frowning. The two girls stood looking at him. They did not breathe while they awaited his answer. Once Ann stirred; she was opening her lips to speak. Titania squeezed her hand hard.

Vickers jerked his head up.

"There are horses in the corral. Get your ropes on two. Turn the others out. No saddles or bridles."

Tony ran out. Vickers gestured to Marco to go with him. Mike Brady had slumped down in the corner, terribly ill.

CHAPTER XIX

FROM the first they rode at breakneck speed. Vickers ordered everything that was done. He wanted no saddles taken; the horses from the corral would not be missed, with the others turned free and scattered. He himself swung Titania up into his own saddle, himself mounting bareback. A sharp command to Marco, and Marco did the same for Ann.

"In the dark they'll try to make a break for it," admonished Vickers. "Tie a rope around her; keep the rope in your hand. No stopping now for anything. If she tries to throw herself out of the saddle, if she falls, keep on; drag her to death. We're out on a limb to-night, boys."

He led the way, Titania's horse checked in close to his. Marco, with Ann, kept close at his heels. Tony and Mike Brady followed with never a word.

Straight north for some three or four miles did Vickers race. He came then into an old wheel track and followed it, turning slightly toward the west, riding harder than ever now, were that possible. In the first hour they must have covered ten or twelve miles. They quitted the wheel track, dived into a pine forest and for another hour rode single file. Vickers led Titania's horse, keeping two ropes in hand, one about her waist ever tight. Once she tried to untie it; but cautious as she was with the knot he must have felt the vibration of the rope. He snarled at her and jerked

her half out of the saddle, and she desisted in quick fear.

They rode in silence save for the thudding of hoofs. They stopped once at a swift creek in a dark, narrow cañon for the horses to drink. Six panting horses together, their nozzles thrust eagerly into the cold water, drinking noisily. Brady got down and lay flat, drinking beside his horse. Titania sought Ann's face in the dark; she knew that Ann's eyes were seeking her. Vickers and Marco spoke in undertones. Then they rode on.

More slowly now perforce. They were in the steepest of the mountains, at times laboring up slopes that seemed almost vertical in the dark, at other times winding along the edge of cliffs. They had turned due west. They were going over the roughest, ruggedest bit of the wilderness shutting off the coast. No matter what haste drove them now, they could go on at little better than a snail's pace. Another hour. Still another. The horses were ready to drop; the girls almost fainting with fatigue. Still they forged on.

It could not be long until dawn now. They followed a long ridge, turning at last sharply downward. Here, suddenly, they were in the heart of the giant redwoods. Among them, even by day, twilight brooded and a great hush pervaded the world. At night it was pitch dark.

Vickers pulled in his mount and slid stiffly from the saddle. The others rode up and man by man dismounted. Tony and Mike were left with the horses. Vickers and Marco, with their captives, went on a few yard. Titania and Ann for the first time could reach out their hands to each other. How their spirits rushed along then through their finger tips!

The sound of a door opening draggingly was their first intimation that there was a cabin here. Vickers went in, dragging Titania after him. He struck a match and lighted a candle stuck in its own drippings to an up-ended log, sawed off square for a table, and dropped down wearily upon its fellow that served as a bench. Marco entered with Ann and closed the door. Almost immediately the others came in.

"It's a great life," grunted Vickers disgustedly. "The devil himself is in it to-night."

Mike Brady tried to grin. Sure, the devil was in it! He wanted to look unconcerned. He was somewhat ashamed of himself, of his sickness back there. They were in for it now; best go ahead like men.

Marco went to the bunk against a wall, dragged it away, lifted a floor board and brought out an unopened case of a dozen bottles.

"We usa his cab'—we drinka his booze," said Marco and got a bottle open.

Tony shoved the bunk back and sat down. Brady sat by him. They all looked at the two girls standing close together now, the ropes still about their waists.

Vickers reached out for a tin cup and extended it toward the bottle.

"I guess a drink won't hurt any of us," he said.

He drank thirstily as though it had been water. When he looked up it must have been the devil, taking a hand to-night, who had put those lights in his eyes.

"We've done it and I'm glad of it," said Vickers. "It was worth it. There's a million dollars there. Suppose we look at 'em?"

"Sure," they said, every man looking eager. Now

that the thing was done each one of them wanted to be glad. Regrets now were useless and worse. A man must go ahead. A sight of their loot would hearten them.

Vickers had made the suggestion. They looked to him expectantly.

"Well?" said Vickers. "Who's got it?"

Slowly expressions changed. Mystification crept in among them. From Vickers they looked at one another. In turn every man's eyes rested on every other man. Blank faces. Stony, white, expressionless faces. And when any pair of eyes lighted, it was with suspicion.

"I ask who's got it?" snapped Vickers. "I asked back there—where it happened. Somebody said, 'I've got it!' Who? You, Mike?"

Mike looked at him wildly.

"Back there—where it happened—it was me said 'Who's got it!' Somebody says, 'I've got it!' I thought—I thought it was you, Vickers. *You have got it, too!*" he ended with a sudden rush of words, a snarl running through them.

Vickers surged to his feet with a great, sullen roar. Both hands clenched hard were flung up above his head.

"You lie!—You dirty dog—You—" He slewed about, having done with reading Mike's face that told him nothing, eyeing both Marco and Tony ferociously. "You, Marco? You, Tony?"

Every man of them in turn, with every other man's eyes hard upon him, swore that he had never touched the thing. Each swore that he thought that the other had it.

Vickers sat down again upon his log. He pulled his revolver out of his holster and held it in his lap.

"I'm in this pretty deep, if you want to know," he said bluntly. "I killed Delamere and got nothing, because it was Delamere, the fool, instead of Bon Ord. I shot Hyde to-night—and I'm to get nothing for that either?"

He laughed at them. The two girls, shuddering and withdrawn until in the small space of the log cabin they were tight pressed against a wall, he utterly ignored. His laugh was that of a man under a terrific strain. To wade through all this that he had waded through and——

"There are just four of us men in here," he said coldly. "There were just four of us in on to-night's deal. One of us four grabbed that tobacco-box. Which one?"

Nobody answered.

A look, swift as any lightning flash, passed between Tony and Marco. The others saw it. To see it was one thing, to read it another. It could have meant: "It's between you and me. We'll divide it—later." It could have meant: "One of these other men is trying to cheat us out of our share; we'll see that nothing of the kind is done!" A look as swift as that one might have meant—anything.

The four men fell to staring one another down, or trying to do so. Suspicion was rampant, truculence unveiled, murder lifting its lip. For nothing in all the world more positively asserted itself as a fact to them than that one of their number was assuming that look of sharp question and suspicion as a mask. *One of them knew!*

Was that one Vickers himself? Three pairs of wolfish eyes flashed to him. Vickers, with his gun on his knee, Vickers making sure to be the first to say, "Who's got it?"

"Come clean, Vickers," said Mike Brady angrily. "You can't get away with a thing like that."

From cold fury Vickers was borne along into a blazing rage; he jumped up and waved his weapon and spewed threats like a madman. Then of a sudden from seething, violent madness he became the picture of still, deadly desperation.

"We're going to find out who did it," he said, his voice trembling with repressed passion. "The skunk that did it won't have the chance of a rabbit with a wolf. He's made a mistake in his man, that's all."

Marco nodded vigorously.

"I killa somebod' myself," he muttered and whipped out his own weapon. As though one impulse actuated the others, Mike Brady and Tony, out flashed their own revolvers. And every man of them was ready to shoot at the drop of a hat.

Titania and Ann were forgotten as completely as though they had never been seen to-night. Any thought of possible pursuit was ignored utterly. But one thing counted now. Here were four men, driven desperate by their own set and circumstance, who had the certain knowledge that they had thrust their necks into the halter, who had held the incentive sufficiently great to dare to the uttermost—and who now found no answer to the simple question: "Who has it?" Within their half-insane brains there was no room for any other consideration.

"We'll have a shake-down all 'round," said Vickers.

"Off with your coats!"

"How about yours?" snapped Mike Brady.

Vickers yanked it off and flung it at him.

"Paw through it. Any one that likes to can paw through it. You know at the start you'll not find anything."

Mike caught it eagerly and went rapidly through the pockets. Before he had done the two Italians were grasping at it. In the end the garment was flung aside.

"Next!" commanded Vickers. "Who's next?"

All three seemed in haste to pull their coats off. Had any man hesitated, how the burning eyes would have shot their evil daggers at him! Every man examined every other man's coat; Vickers got the lot last and rummaged through them painstakingly. As if the tobacco-box could have remained hidden from the first cursory glance!

"Mike, you're next to Tony. Feel him over."

Tony snarled and for an instant it looked as though he were going to leap back, defying them. Then, having thought it over or having seen what lay in the eyes resting on him, he shrugged, lifted his arms and let Mike run his hands all over him. After Mike, then Marco. Then Vickers.

"Mike, you're next!"

A rush of hands fingering through Mike's pockets, examining every inch of his clothing, patting here, feeling there. They emptied his pockets. Nothing half the size of a penny box of matches could have escaped them.

"Pull your boots off! Your boots, too, Tony!"

No man's temper was sweetened as the search grew more and more frenzied. If they had found what they sought upon any man, they would have killed him. When they did not find it, so keen was the general disappointment, that they were near killing him from rage.

As Mike Brady and Tony had been searched, so must Marco, then Vickers himself, submit to the rough examination. At the end all four were baffled, more suspicious of each of the others than ever, and hot with anger. To have three men handling a man, a thing each in turn submitted to, was enough to pour fresh oil upon an already ignited rage. Coatless, in sock-feet, shirts rumpled and torn—they even peered into one another's hats!—they at last grew still. But more wolfish than ever were their eyes. Vickers had spoken truly: the devil was in it.

"Nobody has it on him. Then nobody got it!"

"It's still back there on the table!"

"Somebod' take; somebod' he hide it!"

Now, they all knew that there was not a man of their number who would not have leaped at the chance, had he thought of it and had he had the opportunity, to cheat the others of their share; to make that lovely heap of softly brilliant wealth exclusively his own. The man who had taken it might have hidden it. But where? Not near Leather Hide's, when they first came out; no man fool enough for that. No, he'd not want to return there for it. On the ride here? Tossing it from him in the dark to some clump of bushes? Possible; yet he must know that he would run a very grave danger of never finding it again himself. When they stopped to drink at the creek? There

was a chance. Not likely, though; that spot lay so many miles back, on a trail not infrequently ridden.

The treacherous dog, whichever one it might be, could have brought it along with him, here into the redwoods. It might be lying, right now, not a hundred feet from them—less than a dozen feet. Anywhere outside. Any man of them, as they groped their way to this solitary cabin, could have stooped unseen and hidden it. There were ten thousand likely places; under a log, under a stone, on the ground under the thick coverlet of leaves.

There was no word spoken to break the new, ominous silence. What man should any other address, since none was free of suspicion? Whom should another draw aside to plan with? Each must make his own plans—if he could!—within the locked security of his own breast.

Naturally Marco and Tony would have been drawn together now; yet it seemed that they were as far apart of a sudden as the poles. For Marco had been with Vickers; Tony had been with Mike Brady. How could one know what the other had done? Possibly, even, there was an alliance! Marco and Vickers standing together—or Tony and Brady?

Not a man now could stir without drawing every sharp, evil glance upon him. Not a man so much as dared step outside the cabin. If he went, be sure another would insist upon going with him. Let there be the first inkling that two drew off together, and look for the other two leaping after them.

Here were four men bound together by the very desperate nature of the deed they had planned to-night, and now lashed in an inseparable sheaf by their com-

mon loss and their general distrust. A sheaf of four, a bundle of four men snared together into a faggot for the devil's burning. Surely, surely Vickers had spoken truly!

CHAPTER XX

BON and Random were playing cribbage and beginning to yawn sleepily when old Bill Merriweather came charging in upon them. He stood his rifle in a corner, noted with bright eyes what their pastime was, yanked a chair up to the table for himself and, by way of greeting, suggested:

"Let's make it poker!"

Bon put out his hand, his own eyes brightening as they always did when his grandfather came in sight.

"Why all the artillery, King Canute?" he asked lightly, nodding toward the rifle.

"Ridin' heeled these days, that's all, Bon Boy With a certain bunch of varmints prawlin' wide and free, my trigger finger's just achin' to snuggle up to the trigger. But what I said was poker."

Bon laughed and looked at Random.

"You see? Comes of letting good old King Canute know you've got all those pounds, shillings, and pence. He'll never rest now until he takes all that responsibility off your shoulders."

Old Bill's weatherbeaten countenance, where in little patches it was unconcealed by his amazing beard, broke into countless little wrinkles of delight.

"Shucks, old kid," he chuckled, as with fine disregard to their game he shoved the cribbage board aside and reached for the deck, "it ain't just that. Here's a stranger in our midst and by all the sweet laws of hospitality he's got a right to expect to be entertained."

"Isn't it a trifle late?" suggested Random mildly.

"Late, your foot!" rapped out the old man. "What's time got to do with the likes of us. It's never late when good fellers can circle 'round a table. I'm sort of thirsty, too, Bon Boy."

Bon brought a bottle and old Bill partook thereof, then set the bottle "handy" at his elbow.

Then Bon, looking as though he meant what he said, offered pleasantly:

"A little game wouldn't be bad, just to pass the time, I've got a couple of dollars; let's make it penny ante, what say?"

His grandfather looked at him aghast.

"Bon!" he said reproachfully.

"Hear that, Random? The old devil's out for blood as usual. Remember I warned you. Strip the deck; turn the joker wild; rip off the roof, and let her go!"

"That's the stuff, Bon Boy. That's talkin'. High card deals."

He threw out the low cards, displayed the joker, shuffled the deck most skilfully, allowed a cut to be made, dealt three cards like lightning—and turned up the high one for himself.

"He knows every card in the deck by its first name," said Bon. "They come when he calls 'em."

Old Bill laughed.

"It's a man's game," he said. "It takes a man to play it—right!"

He was in high feather to-night; feeling his oats, he proclaimed; and would have ridden fifty miles for a game.

"The only thing I don't like about our pardner, Ranny here," said he as the game started, "is that he

mixes water in his lick. When we get him broke o' that nefarious habit, Bon Boy, I think he'll do first rate."

It was just then that Sheriff Ord came in. When he saw who was here before him a quick frown darkened his eyes. As for Merriweather, his shaggy white brows came down loweringly and he put a world of eloquence into his: "Hmf!"

"Hello, dad," cried Bon, going to shake hands as he had with his grandfather. "We're just starting. Better take a hand."

"No, thanks," said Ord, and for the moment seemed about to turn and go out. Old Bill saw his look and read his thought; then looked prematurely triumphant. In the end the sheriff sat down.

"Deal 'em up, Ranny," cried the old man impatiently. "Deal 'em up, kid. There's no reason that I know of, why the game ain't to roll on."

"Dad might pinch the crowd of us for gambling," laughed Bon.

"Hmf!" said old Bill.

John Ord threw one leg over another, made a cigarette and said carelessly:

"I'll stick around until you're through with your game, Bon. No hurry, either; I've had a day of it and just sitting still feels good. After a while I want a word or two with you."

"Make it now, dad."

"No. Go ahead. I'll wait."

"If anybody is waitin' for me to go," grunted Merriweather, "he ain't in any hurry, I guess."

Bon kept his eyes on his cards, though his thoughts were anywhere else. Here was one of those moments

which did come now and then, the hardest of his usually carefree life. To have with him the two men whom he loved most on earth, to see them bristle with antagonism, to watch the warmth that was inherently in each filmed over with ice and to know that he himself, as much as anything else, fostered this ill-will, hurt him more than any one but himself knew. Two of the finest men that ever breathed, Bon found them, and all for no valid reason at all electing themselves to hate each other! He would have given his right hand to see their two right hands meet in friendship.

"Well, kid, gone to sleep?" demanded his grandfather.

Bon started, made his bet blindfold, and turned to his father.

"Mother all right?" he asked.

Ord nodded.

"Tell her I'm getting homesick for her," said Bon. "I'm sneaking out to-morrow night to say hello. What's Sister Ann doing?"

"Playing around, I guess," his father returned. As he spoke he shot a quick look toward Random, concluding with a pretense at being casual: "Don't see a whole lot of her these days."

"I'll raise you ten," said Merriweather. "Ten little bones, ten little berries, ten little seeds. Watch 'em grow, kid. Watch me plant 'em in fertile soil. There's goin' to be a harvest real soon."

"You haven't been home to-night then, dad?" asked Bon.

"Just came from there. Oh, Ann you mean? She hadn't got back."

"She's getting to be a wild one," grinned Bon. "Where's she off to this time?"

Ord shrugged. And a second time, not in the least intending to do so, he glanced sharply at Random. Random saw the look as he had seen the other and flushed under it.

"I haven't seen her to-day, Mr. Ord," he said stiffly. "Am I sitting up to-night with a nest of wild cats?" exclaimed Bon.

"Tee-dee-dee, tee-dee-dee; tee-dee-dum-dum-dum!" sang old Merriweather like some old cracked-voiced bird of sinister predilections. He was enjoying himself. And, incidentally, he was winning at cards.

The sheriff had merely lifted his brows when Random spoke to him, making no spoken rejoinder. Random began to deal. Bon sat looking straight ahead of him and seeing nothing.

"Rumble up, tumble up, here's the place to get your money back," chanted old Bill.

"Funny about Ann," said Bon. They all looked at him sharply. There was something in his tone to catch their attention. He shifted in his chair.

"What's funny about it?" asked his father.

Bon turned his eyes toward the sheriff. And his eyes looked puzzled, very thoughtful—perhaps vaguely uneasy. Then he laughed.

"Oh, nothing, I guess. Only I happen to know where Ann was going late this afternoon. I thought she'd have been home long ago." He looked at the clock on the shelf behind him. "After twelve. What time did you leave home, dad?"

"Ten-twenty," said Ord. "Your mother and I thought she was visiting with the Hampton girls in Indian Rock. She might have stayed all night."

"Guess she's all right," said Bon. "I'll take two cards, Random."

Random dealt him seven cards and, had they not stopped him, would no doubt have handed him all the cards in the deck. He had seen the look in Bon's eyes; just a flicker of uneasiness, no more. Yet he knew that in his friend's sunny brain any foreboding would find it hard to enter; that when Bon grew even the most slightly concerned, another man would have been electrified with alarm. And alarm did of a sudden leap out and claim Random for its own.

"Watch the man deal!" cried Merriweather. "You'd think, to look at him——"

Random, saying nothing, was staring at Bon. And under the look Bon came suddenly to his feet.

"Put a name to it!" snapped his father. "What's up."

"Nothing," said Bon. "Nothing, I guess. I just know what Ann planned. She was going to meet Titania——"

"Who?" demanded John Ord. "Who the devil's Titania?"

"A girl," said Bon. Merriweather twittered. Bon, grown sober now, added curtly: "The girl you know as Leather Hide's girl, dad."

John Ord sat very still, hands clasped behind his head, his cigarette going calmly. But there was a little tightening of the muscles at the corners of his eyes which Bon saw and understood.

"Everything's all right, of course," said Bon, going for his hat. "No earthly reason why it shouldn't be. But I'll go make sure. Take my place here, won't you, dad? Play my game for me."

"I'm going with you, Bon."

"No. Let me go alone. I'll be straight back. I

know what I'm doing; I'll go hell-for-leather through all the short cuts; in the dark you'd break a leg for your horse. It's a one-man job, anyway. Play my hand for me, dad; that's a good man."

Had it not been for a look just then from old Bill, John Ord would most certainly have refused; a teasing sort of look, very eloquent, jeering—daring him to call for cards.

"Step along, then," said Ord shortly, and took Bon's chair.

Bon stopped only long enough to catch up his heavy holster from the bunk and hurried out, buckling the belt about him as he went. He went up into the saddle of the first horse at hand, a half-wild young demon that his grandfather had left tied at the door, and was off through the dark like a shot. As he went he heard the door open and slam shut behind him and the next moment knew that another than himself had run out, mounted the sheriff's horse, and was racing along after him. It flashed upon him that here came Random.

"If he's left those two alone back there," he groaned inwardly, "they'll be going for their guns over the first show-down." And over his shoulder he yelled, "Go back, Random!"

"Go back yourself!" boomed out Random's deep voice. Which was the end of all argument.

As he rode Bon tried to think clearly, to banish the anxiety which had been growing in him, to assure himself that nothing had happened to Ann simply because there was no reason why anything should happen to her. She had met Titania, he knew that. She had wanted to see Titania alone and had made Bon understand that there might be times when a girl could bring

more to another girl than could any man, no matter who. She was to have seen Titania about twilight and he had promised, "just for this once," to let them have their girl-talk. He knew that Ann was up to something; he believed that she was going to urge Titania to come to stay with her. What a glorious thing to happen!

Now, no doubt, the worst he would discover was that Ann had gone to stay overnight with Titania. It would be like Ann, who was forever preaching to him not to be a fool, and was herself by no means immune to the virus of escapades. Well, what harm? She'd be safe enough, no doubt. Just as Titania, though most unpleasantly situated, had ever been safe.

Random, with just about all he could do to keep the hastening figure in sight before him, came up with Bon only at the end of the ride. At the edge of the forest marking the boundary of the clearing about Leather Hide's house, they dismounted.

"Hold the horses," said Bon. "I'm going ahead on foot."

"I'm tying my horse," retorted Random. "You'd better do the same unless you want to walk back."

So they tied their horses and went forward side by side. Of a sudden the dogs began to bark. The house was dark; nothing strange about that. Every one here should be asleep.

"We'll wake 'em, just the same," said Bon and stepped to the front door. He lifted his hand to knock——

"Hello, door's wide open!" he exclaimed.

"There's something wrong," said Random in a queer voice. "I can feel it." And rapped loudly on the wall.

When no answer came he rapped more loudly and then called.

Silence is not always the same. It is not a mere negative thing, not solely the absence of sound. Some indefinable quality, sprung perhaps from its own cause, enters into it and qualifies it. Here was a silence too deep not to be significant in some wild sinister way. A sombre, hushed, unnatural silence.

With one impulse they stepped in through the door. Bon trod on something and stooped for it. A candle end. That was odd, too; to find a candle on the floor by the door. Yet it was just what was wanted; he struck a match and lighted it.

Doors stood open everywhere. Not only was the house empty, it felt deserted.

"Ann!" shouted Bon. "Titania!"

Both men knew there would be no answer. They looked at each other ominously; dread in one pair of eyes saw dread like its own reflection in the other.

They looked in at the door on their right. Here was Titania's room, to be recognised as hers at a glance. Some flowers on her table, a faint, vague air of femininity. The bed had not been slept in to-night.

They looked in at the door nearly opposite Titania's, that opening into the main room, dining-room, sitting-room combined. At first they thought this was empty too. Then, as the candle flame steadied, they saw something on the floor, behind the table near the far wall. They hurried forward; holding the light low this something was revealed in all its horror.

"Leather Hide," said Bon. "Shot through the back of the head. Like Delamere."

"But Ann? And Titania?"

Bon did not answer. Had the two girls been here at all to-night? Had they come before this thing happened? Or after? If they had not come here at all, as he began praying within himself, then where were they?

"We'd better take a good look 'round," he said at last.

They went into the adjoining room, the kitchen. The door here, too, was open before them. The window was open; the door at the back was open. They went on in haste, glancing into corners, even into cupboards. Into the room at the back, half shed, and finally again to the front room where Leather Hide lay. Bon stooped over him again.

"Must have happened three or four hours ago, at least," he said. "He never had a chance; didn't even go for his gun. In the back——"

"There's what caused it!" said Random, pointing.

Under the table where it had fallen and now lay reflecting the candle light, an unset emerald flashed its cool rays into their eyes. Bon, with a sudden thought, returned to the man on the floor.

"His emerald ring is still on his finger," he exclaimed. "So it wasn't robbery, after all!"

"Unless," said Random, "there was some other, greater loot? Or—" He hesitated. "Unless there was some interruption—and a scare was thrown into whomever did it——"

"We'll look again in Titania's room. If she and Ann were here to-night there may be something to show."

They went eagerly, scarcely knowing whether they wanted to find such a sign or find nothing. The first

thing they noted was a second piece of candle on the floor; the one which Ann, holding so long, had finally dropped here.

"Candles on the floor—something of a rush, some kind of excitement. All the doors open— Looks like more than one man had been rushing around——"

"The ceiling has been ripped away!"

"I wish dad had come," muttered Bon. "He'd make something of all this."

They did what they could, examining everything, trying to make scattered details unite in telling them what they wanted to know. They even went up into the attic.

"It's Titania's secret room," said Bon, a strange tremor in his voice. "She told Ann about it. Here are some of her things; shoes and stockings——"

"And a dress in the middle of the floor!" Random snatched it up. "Trampled on, too. A brand new dress— See that, Bon? It's been let fall and walked on— They were up here——"

"My God!" Bon cried out.

Random caught him by the arm, demanding fiercely:

"Well? What is it, man? You don't mean——"

Bon flung him off and sprang back to the opening in the ceiling of Titania's room. He leaped through and when Random joined him was questing up and down in the room below like a hound on a hot scent; seeking for any other little sign that might tell him all of the terrible truth which he began to glimpse.

At last, finding nothing, he straightened up and gazed at his friend with wild, blazing eyes.

"I'm a fool at this sort of thing—I wish to God we'd had dad along! But— A candle dropped here and

one dropped there—doors open everywhere! More than one man, Random? Then more than two! Four men, by the Lord, and I can guess the names of them all. Titania and Ann were here—they were up in the attic when the thing happened! And the man that shot Leather Hide found them!”

“They—they wouldn’t——”

Random could get no further. Bon fairly glared at him.

“If the two girls saw what happened—then what?”

Random fell back as though a blow had taken him in the chest.

“I’m going after them!” Of a sudden Bon spoke very quietly; he began to see clearly and forced himself to plan coolly. “You go back for dad on the run——”

“I’m coming with you!”

“You fool, can’t you understand? I may be off on the wrong foot; I don’t *know* anything, do I? I just see a chance and am after it on the run, the way you’re after dad. Tell him all we know. Tell him that I’ve a hunch that it’s Vickers and his gang. That we know Leather Hide was planning to clean out. That they’ve waited until he had his treasure on him, then potted him. They’ll have taken the girls.”

He stopped short; a terrible look was in his eyes. He moistened his lips and swallowed and ended curtly:

“If dad ever wants to see Ann alive again, tell him to snap into it. Tell him my guess where they’ve gone: Leather Hide has a cabin on the coast; where he lands his booze. A boat is due now. They’ve headed for that. Anyway, that’s where I’m going. Dad’ll know best. Now, kid——”

“Bon——”

Bon gripped him by the shoulder.

"I know, old man. I wish I had you with me, too. But it's the only way."

Random, his face absolutely without expression, stood looking at him a moment.

"Righto!" he said quietly.

Together they ran back to their horses.

CHAPTER XXI

"POKER for two is no game for grown men to play," grunted the sheriff and thrust the cards away.

"My pal Ranny's beat you to your horse," chuckled old Bill, leering as evilly as he knew how, which was very evilly indeed. "We're corked up here together for once in our lives, Johnny Ord—and I recommend cards. I'd hate, for Bon's sake, to trounce his old man or forget myself and go to pullin' his nose for him. That's why I recommend cards. And now, as for two-handed poker bein' no he-man's game, I dunno so well about that. Take a stripped deck and strip her some more; cut 'em down to the real ones. Then turn the joker loose. And nex'—raise the ante!"

John Ord snorted at him. More than ever did old Bill jeer.

"Oh, if you're scared o' me——"

Ord's mouth hardened. A steely glint came into his eyes.

"I've a notion——"

Old Bill cackled drily.

"Cut for deal," he suggested. "Or will I hand 'em out and high card deal?"

"Cut," snapped Ord. "Table stakes."

"Table stakes? Chicken feed! Suppose I've got a pocketful of money on me? I'm willin' to take your I O U when I've cleaned you; and I guess my word's good, ain't it?"

"Not with me," said Ord. "And never was."

Old Bill Merriweather half rose and made a suggestive gesture, a clawlike hand diving down toward his hip. The sheriff knew the gesture well, having witnessed it many a time in his career, and eyed him steadily, ready for—anything.

"You—you—" snarled the old man, and out came about seven inches of beard. Then with a mighty "Hmf!" he subsided, his shrewd old eyes ablaze. "Won't take my word, huh? Will you take my note of hand, then?"

"Yes," said Ord calmly. "And collect it on you through my lawyer."

"All right, Mr. Ord; all right, sir. There's pen and ink; there's paper. I'll write you a note and sign it; you'll do likewise for me. We plank 'em down right here and we take a stack of chips and we play little old freeze-out. How's that strike you?"

"As the only way we two can do business," said Ord.

Merriweather got the ink bottle unstoppered, spilled ink all over both hands doing so, and grabbed the pen as though it were a knife and he knew where to jab it.

"How much?" he demanded.

"Suit yourself," said Ord. "This is your game."

"A thousand?"

"Suits me. Make it ten, if you want."

Narrower and narrower grew the old glinting blue eyes. Old Bill was looking at John Ord as though here was a man he had never seen before and would like to gauge. "Just what is this feller for a man?" he might be asking himself.

"Ten ain't overmuch," he said. "Not for me, it ain't. I could make it a hundred thousand, Johnny Ord, and not weep any if I lost it."

"Better dribble your pocket money out by tens, hadn't you?" scoffed Ord. "Time to shoot your second ten thousand after the first goes."

"Hmf!"

Merriweather scribbled away swiftly, finished and signed his note, and thrust pen, paper, and ink across the table.

"Ten thousand?" asked Ord without the quiver of an eyelash.

"Yep," retorted Merriweather, as grim and expressionless as an old Indian chief.

John Ord's big hand cramped itself to the pen and he wrote. The two papers were put together in the middle of the table after each man had done his bit toward insulting the other by scrutinizing his note suspiciously, obviously hunting something wrong about it. Then, as one man, they pulled their hats low down over their eyes, sat forward, squared their elbows and prepared for battle. Either of them could lose ten thousand dollars and not go to the poorhouse; yet unquestionably it was a "tidy sum," and think of the anguish of seeing the other man haul it in and unmask a triumphant glare as he did so!

Poker for two certainly has its drawbacks. Yet Bill Merriweather's prescription: "Strip the deck, turn the joker wild—and raise the ante," went a long way toward lifting a game out of the class of boresome things!

"Hundred dollars!"

"Raise you a hundred!"

"Thought so. Two hundred more to play."

"*And* two!"

"Four kings."

"Take it."

Shuffle, cut, and deal.

"One hundred."

"Make it five."

"Call you."

"Full house!"

"Hmf!"

Shuffle, cut, and deal.

"Five hundred to draw cards."

A narrow, glinting, speculative stare. A grunt.

"Five hundred goes."

A flash of eyes darkly under lowered hat brim; a jeer in them.

"One thousand on this hand."

"*And* one thousand."

The snapping deposit of blue chips.

"Let's see 'em."

A full house here, a full house there. Both good, but one better. Chips withdrawn to one side of the table, stacked nicely, each click of each chip having a merry little voice all its own.

A game as these two played it should not last long. Yet it did. Neither man had ever watched the other's play before; they were like two skilled swordsmen meeting for the first time. They drove each other hard, but always it was back and forth with them. John Ord went down to his last three hundred dollars and came steadily back into opulence. Old Bill was forced back and back until his pile dribbled so low that, wise in poker wisdom, he knew better than to count! Yet he won back, at first by dribbles, then by sizable pots. For the most part they were very silent men saving for the few words, stereotyped phrases, of the game. Yet at times, under his breath, John Ord hummed what

might be termed his old poker chant which went: "Dol, dol, dol, dol-dol, dol-dol, dol, dol, dol"; a meditative recitative employed at times when he studied his hand. Grim and silent himself, old Bill at such times could not wholly control himself, and though he allowed but the curtest of "Hmfs!" to escape his lips, he did yank mightily at an ever lengthening beard. "Johnny Ord," as old Bill would have said himself, "got on his nerves."

Jealously as each guarded his winnings, a couple of the blue chips at the fringe of a goodly pot had gotten themselves covered in the scattered discard. Old Bill dealing, and preparing to hand out the cards called for to complete a hand, very deftly inched the wandering chips toward his pile, looking very innocent about it all. Ord snapped out:

"Reckon those might belong to me, Merriweather."

"What's that?" asked old Bill more innocent than ever.

"There happen to be two blue chips under those cards you're raking in!"

"So there are! Mine, too."

"Look a lot like the same breed of cattle I'm cor-ralling over at my side," said Ord.

"Call 'em mavericks, then," growled the old man, "and put 'em back in the general round-up." He thrust them, though his fingers lingered on the way, back to the middle of the table.

He yielded the point a little too readily; Ord knew then, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that these were his own and, what was more, that old Bill knew it. Only two blue chips, only two hundred dollars—but then the old, moss-grown "principle of the thing."

"We're supposed to be playing poker, not sleight-of-hand——"

"Call me a thief!" shouted old Bill.

John Ord shrugged and reached out for the chips in question. A lean old hand like a talon clamped about his wrist.

Random, riding furiously, arrived never a single instant too soon. The two men were on their feet as he burst into the room—and for the first time Random saw the full length of old Bill's beard. Like a mountain waterfall plunging down vertically, lashed pure white, it fell below his waistline. They must have risen hastily; oh, very hastily indeed! For the table which should be between them lay on its side and cards and poker chips were everywhere.

"Both girls gone!" cried Random from the door. "Leather Hide killed and robbed—Bon thinks Vickers and his crowd did it—the two girls must have seen the thing done. Bon is off after them——"

John Ord's hands fell to his sides. He took a deep breath, shook himself like some great dog emerging from the water, and said sternly:

"Go slow now. Let's have just what's happened. What you *know*, before we get what you guess. Slow does it."

Random, though every tense nerve in his body called for haste, understood and nodded. Quietly now, forcing himself to deal coolly with what details he had to impart, he told everything. From time to time Ord nodded; now and then he asked a quick question; at the end he appeared sunk into a profound reverie. Random looked at him curiously. Those devils had Ann—and Ann's father seemed utterly unconcerned all of a sudden. Had he offered to go on with his game, Random could hardly have been surprised.

After a few moments Ord spoke.

"Bon's got the right hunch. Vickers and his outfit have been after Leather Hide's loot a long time. Leather Hide has been getting ready to skip the country. They knew; they stopped him. Ann and that other girl were there somehow." He paused.

"Bon's afraid——" began Random.

Ord knew and nodded.

"Yes. And Bon knows 'em. They'd carry them along—back into the mountains, of course—Bon's right about the cabin by the coast, too. Random, you streak into Indian Rock——"

"No!" said Random. "I let Bon ride alone because I saw it was the thing to do. Now—I'm going!"

"Let's not get all het-up," said Ord. "They've got Ann, my girl, and I'm straight after them. You——"

"They've got Ann," cried Random, his voice catching in his throat, "and I'm going with you."

He might have said much more, yet this with the look on his face was enough. Again the sheriff nodded.

"Good enough," he said, and seeing a rifle standing against the wall, he went to it.

"Keep your paws off'n that gun!" shrilled old Bill. "It's mine, and I'm goin' to use it. My Bon Boy's all alone, single hand, against four o' the trickiest murderin' men in the world. Think I'm goin' to let him stack into 'em with no help?" He snatched up his own gun and whooped out at them: "I guess he's countin' on his granddad right now!"

There were other weapons here and Ord went for Bon's rifle over the fireplace. Then on into the kitchen where he filled his pockets with ammunition. They heard the water running; he had stopped for a drink.

"Bon's on your horse, Mr. Ord."

Ord returned, carrying a lantern.

"There are Bon's horses in the corral." He stopped at Random's side, eying him keenly. "I was going to send you to get word to Guard Lawlor; but never mind. Our lines are out anyway; no man of them can slip through any of the towns. You'll come with me, with this understood; you are my deputy and you take orders from me."

"Glad to," said Random heartily.

"Come ahead, then," and Ord hurried out, ignoring old Bill.

But Bill Merriweather was a hard man to ignore. He came tramping along in their wake.

"Me, I'm with you—for once in your life, John Ord."

Random had armed himself with Bon's shotgun; his pockets were heavy with cartridges loaded with buckshot. Merriweather climbed up into his own saddle, and, awaiting them, fell to tucking his beard inside his shirt. Ord roped two horses, singling out Nabob and Gray Eagle, while Random brought saddles and bridles.

From the first they rode hard, Ord leading the way, the others following close behind. The forest swallowed them up. Only a man who knew the trails well here could ever have found a swift way. The sheriff, a man of too wide an experience to sacrifice everything to haste, went straight to Leather Hide's house; he wanted to see with his own eyes what was to be seen, to check Bon's findings and conclusions with his own.

"Did you boys leave a light burning?" he asked sharply when the others drew up with him.

"I don't know—I don't think so."

There was a lamp burning in the house now. They

went in, looking to right and left. The lamp was on the table where Leather Hide lay. No one shared the silence with the quiet body.

The sheriff, going to the table for the lamp, saw the sheet of paper placed where it must be seen.

"Bon came back after you left him," he said.

For Bon, tardily remembering the hidden cellar and the tunnel under the house, had returned to make a quick examination here. So his note informed them, adding: "I've gone on where I told Random. *I'm sure.*"

"I'll make sure, too," said Ord, and allowed himself ten minutes during which he went from room to room, his iron-gray brows bunched thickly over eyes that saw everything. Always and inevitably, in a hasty flight men leave signs behind them. On the bureau top were deep scratches made by the big nails of heavy boots. Up in the attic was a handkerchief of Ann's. He crumpled it fiercely in his hand.

"The girls were here. Maybe they got away?—Ann would have been home then, before I left. And they'd have run by Bon's cabin. No, they didn't get away. Bon's right, but we'll make sure all along the line. Next we stop a minute at the other cabin, up on the river."

Again he led the way and they rode hard after him. They found the hidden cabin dark and deserted. Yet Ord spent five minutes here, looking everywhere.

"Find out anything?" demanded old Bill querulously.

"Yes. They were packed to go when they left here. They didn't come back this way." He mounted again

—he was riding Nabob—and turned north. “Get set in your saddles for about forty miles, now.”

They were off like the rush of a storm wind.

“We’re comin’, Bon Boy!” yelled old Bill.

CHAPTER XXII

A STONE hut, clinging like some wild sea-bird's nest to its dizzy place upon a wind-swept, ocean-washed headland, was to become to-night the point of convergence of many trails. As the ancient fabled lodestone, which drew many fair craft hurtling toward it and their own destruction, so the squat, ugly stone hut seemed to-night to be drawing stormy souls toward wreckage. Men turned toward it from the land; men headed this way from the sea.

Standing out boldly at the crest of the Pacific-lashed cliffy coast, the stone hut remained concealed. For it was small, its walls were of the same unquarried rock which lay about it in tumbled boulders, which rose at one side and back in flinty spires, which descended with bold sweep down to the white sand of the tiny coves at each side of the promontory's base. It had one door and one window only, both dark now; and both faced out to sea.

In the darkest hour of the night, midway between midnight and dawn, a man made a laborious way up a steep path which led from the more southerly of the two little coves up to the hut. Despite an already rising wind the sky was strewn over with a heavy ocean mist. Sometimes a star shone out dimly, a faint light looking to be swirling through the heavens. Swiftly its light dimmed in the damp smother of mist, flickered weakly and wanly and died out. For the most part, had one been watching here, he could have guessed at the man's

labored approach only by the almost constant sifting down of sand and gravel, the faint whispering rush of débris trod upon and sent racing downward along the steep pathway, rattling over the cliffs on its sheer drop into the fathomless black waters at the cliffs' foot.

He came on in slow haste. It was a dangerous path to follow, one dangerous even by day. Yet he came on steadily though his lungs must have been near bursting. At times he crawled on all fours. Was his attempt at haste prompted by something ahead, which called? Or by something behind, which drove? Did he keep his eyes always ahead, trying to pierce the thick dark with them? Or did he keep looking over his shoulder? There was no light to tell; there were no eyes to see.

He came at last, breathing heavily, to the edge of the little flat on which the stone hut stood and so to the hut itself. He rested a moment and now, no doubt, must have turned his eyes seaward. Far out yonder in the emptiness of the night a light winked. But it vanished so swiftly! The light of some strange sea-craft, flying secretly upon its own errand—or of a star, low in the heavens, washed out by the scud of fog?

He did not rest long. His hands found the rugged wall and he began feeling for the door. He found it and all his haste rushed back upon him as he sought the latch; perhaps he expected or dreaded to find the door locked. It was unlocked; it swung heavily open; under his own weight thrown against it and impelled by a great gush of wind, he stumbled into the hut and slammed the door shut after him.

Here was stillness; no wind beating at him, no incessant boom and thunder of waves beating in his ears; just a dull muffled monotone of large sounds. He struck

a match; the flame of it shook in his hands. There was a bench and the man dropped down on it wearily. The match burned up more brightly as he held it more steadily. It made an enormous, bloated shadow behind the man's back; it illuminated his face. Here, then, was the fat man, Fancher.

The single room of the place in which, after all his effort, he found himself was very small; perhaps ten feet square. There was the bench on which he sat; there was one long table under an equally long, low window. On the table a battery of coal-oil lamps; seven in all. Over the window a green roller-shade, drawn down now.

Fancher blew out his fat cheeks, let his match die, mopped his face in the dark, and lit the second match. Obviously in haste again, he went to the table and began lighting the lamps. All seven. Each had a silvered reflector. He adjusted these so that the lamps would hurl their light outward, through the window, out to sea. Then he flipped up the shade.

He adjusted the wicks carefully, making sure that each lamp shed its maximum of light. Then he went to the door, slipped through quickly to close the door against a rush of wind, and stood again in the dark, peering out across the dark ocean.

On the deck of a little schooner, riding dark, a man stood and had stood a long while, turned toward the coast-line. He called out suddenly:

"Cap'n Burlock! A light, sir."

"Right, Smalley; I saw it," answered a deep, impatient voice, and Burlock came to the rail. "Time, too. Pass the word."

The seaman turned away. Almost immediately Burlock called to him.

"Wait a minute, Smalley. Come back. There's something wrong——"

Together they watched the light on shore. For perhaps ten minutes they watched it. All the while it blazed steadily through the dark.

"Aye, there's something gone wrong," said Smalley.

"That's not Jim Hyde," Burlock muttered deep down in his throat. "No, and it's not Vickers. Maybe they sent another man, Smalley; and maybe it's all right; and maybe he just got his signals twisted."

Smalley, knowing his captain and his captain's ways, wisely kept his mouth shut.

"Get the launch overboard," snapped Burlock. "I'm going ashore. Keep dark out here until we see what's what. Don't do anything until you hear from me."

"Right you are," said Smalley. "I'm to wait for you to come back."

Burlock held him a moment, an enormous hand on his arm.

"Day'll be breaking inside a couple of hours. A man can't tell. I'll see what I find ashore. We'll play safe, Smalley. Don't pay any attention to anybody's signal but mine!"

"How'll I know?"

"We'll change the signal right now. Wait for the light to come on nine times straight. Then seven. Then two times. Got that? Nine, seven, two."

"Nine, seven, two," repeated Smalley. "No other signal answered."

"And if I don't show up, back here, by day," said Burlock thoughtfully, "you stand out to sea and wait

for dark again. If I want you to come in by day, which I don't look for, remember it's three fires on the beach."

"Nine, seven, two, for lights," said Smalley. "Three smokes on the beach by day."

Fancher stood motionless, staring out to sea for a long while. Fifteen minutes, twenty—perhaps half an hour. And never an answering light. Then he returned to the hut, anxious and uncertain. He threw himself down on the bench and lay stretched out at length gazing vacantly up at the roof. But he couldn't lie still. He grew more nervous at every second. Maybe they'd send a boat ashore without showing a light? Maybe there were reasons for added secrecy and stealth. Maybe, even now, a boat was coming?

He scrambled to his feet, put out all the lights and went outside. Darker than ever was the night now, used as his eyes were to the hard, bright light of the row of lamps. He began finding the way with his feet, shuffling along. He forced himself to go slowly; the shouting of the ocean seemed straight down under him. He shivered as a piece of rock slipped under his tread.

There were the two coves below, separated by the promontory on which the stone hut stood. Fancher, having approached this place from the south, knew only of the south cove and made his way back down to it. Meanwhile Burlock was headed for the other and more gentle bit of beach. He'd land a couple of hundred yards to the north of where Fancher waited.

Riding toward this focal point from the west, up over the mountain ridges, came Vickers and his men

and the two prisoners. They had tarried nearly an hour at the cabin among the redwoods and now, to the last man of them, were eager to be at the coast before dawn. They came, close together, like sullen demons linked one to all others by an unbreakable chain. They were fleeing, for they must flee; but not as they had planned, not full-handedly. Empty-handed, bloody-handed, half mad each one with hatred. The most terrible hatred in the world, since it must be bottled up, held under pressure of each heart, since no man knew upon what other man it should spill forth. Every man hated every other man, since any one of those others might be the one who had tricked him and robbed him and made his crimes all for nothing. Love and loyalty may bind men tight together. Distrust and hatred may do the same.

Nearly a mile before reaching the stone hut these men dismounted. From here on they would go in the straight line, making far better time on foot. Here, in a little upland meadow with a creek through it, they left their horses.

All night a rope had been knotted about her waist, precaution against attempted escape in the dark. All night a rope about Ann's waist had dragged her on. Now that they were to walk Vickers still kept one rope in his hand, bidding Titania sharply to step along; and Marco made himself similarly responsible for Ann.

Now again the girls might touch each other, grasp hands and even speak a word or two. But there was so little to say and they were so weary with this long night and with the terrors which ran always with them. They knew that Vickers had led the way toward the coast, and now they could smell the wet salt air; they

knew that here the men expected to find a boat and to stand out to sea—toward free, trackless flight. What to expect for themselves—this, they did not know.

The men led; the girls must follow. It was like a procession in the Inferno. Baffled fury, fleeing, conducted drooping hopelessness.

A laborious walk among crags brought them at last to a narrow defile and, through it, to the stone hut.

"Wait here," muttered Vickers. "I'll go light the lamps."

The other man made no verbal objection; too deep and mighty a sullenness lay over them for them even to care to break it with the spurt of words. Simply they ignored. Let Vickers out of their sight, even to step through a door into a bare room? Let any man of their number out of their sight? It was not to be thought of. So Vickers, opening the door, had them all at his heels. The six crowded the small room.

They lighted the lamps and Vickers began signalling, drawing down the shade—flipping it up—drawing it down—raising it again. The men watched him. Then, together, they blew out the lamps and waited.

They had no answer. Smalley, on the schooner, had seen, had recognized the correct signalling this time, but had his orders from Burlock. Burlock, on his way ashore, and requiring all his wits about him since danger was all about him open-mawed, angry-taloned, saw and came on. Everything was no doubt all right after all; yet why the first incorrect signal light? He could only come ahead, make his landing, and conduct his investigations at hand.

"Nothing doing," said Mike Brady. "We better try 'em again."

Again matches scratched, flames flickered and darted to the lamp wicks, and the bright light poured out through the long window. Again Vickers manipulated the shade, the other men watching, counting, making sure that he made no error. They put out the lights and waited again. Smalley saw; Burlock saw; yet those in the hut had no answer.

"Bad luck!" growled Marco. "Don' I tella you we ketcha da bad luck?"

"Leather Hide expected Burlock to-night," snapped Vickers. "We all know that. We know that he was getting ready to jump this way himself. Burlock's late, that's all——"

"Late?" said Mike Brady. "Yes, Burlock's late, all right. And us? It's my notion we're done."

They were in the dark now. Perhaps they liked the dark better than the light; perhaps each man would rather that the others did not see the look in his eyes.

"Nobody knows we came this way," Vickers rasped out.

"They might guess, mightn't they? John Ord's a wise old bird."

"They may not even find out anything for two or three days——"

"And then again—they might!"

"Croak, will you? What's the use——"

"If anybody should come this way, we better be outside somewhere. There's plenty other places we can watch for Burlock—without being all cooped up in a slaughter-house."

"We'll try the lights once more."

They did and with no new result. They stumbled out again in the dark, Vickers and Marco leading their

prisoners. Returning through the rocky defile which had led them hither, they turned northward along a ridge and came in a few hundred steps to a little level, grassy spot, where they stopped. Here they were near the hut, yet not too near; concealed from it by splintered shafts of rock, yet placed so that a man might find a coigne of vantage whence he could look down on the hut and out to sea. Here were a few wind-blown trees with branches tossed wildly forth as though they meant to break free from the bondage of roots among the clefts and flee landwards. Above them rose a score of monster crags through which the screaming wind found its tortured way; in the air about them was the great shock and murmur of the pounding waves against the black rocks far below.

It was still very dark but the first, faint, and vague feeling of dawn was in the air. Never was day more impatiently awaited than by Ann and Titania. Even to hope was impossible in this utter dark, with never a star to whisper its cheer to them. The glad privilege of the valiant young day is to stir the heavy pulses, to bring vigor sweeping back in its great tide, to awaken hope. What would this new day bring?

Soon it would throw its gates wide open. Light would gush through, palpitant, golden. Where light shines, shadows gather. Life itself would quicken. Life, like light, has its shadow. Death lurked in that grim dawn upon the cliffs.

CHAPTER XXIII

FIRST of all, the dawning day brought Bon Ord. Looking gaunt, haggard-eyed, having ridden hard with fear and uncertainty running always at his side, he came to a dark ravine at the first, thin glint of light. He was now to know whether he had judged right or wrong. Everything had been guesswork. Some one had shot down Leather Hide: That came close to summarizing all exact knowledge. Guesswork that there had been several men, that they had robbed Leather Hide of his emeralds, that Titania and Ann had been chance witnesses and were now prisoners, in danger of their lives; guesswork, most of all, that they had come this way!

But, had his former presumptions been correct, he felt it far more than an even break that the fugitives would head straight to the stone hut. He knew and they knew that it was time for Burlock's schooner. The very time itself, chosen for the blow which had been struck, pointed like the needle of a compass to this one spot.

"I'll find them here," Bon stubbornly told himself, "or all my guess is wrong. I'll find them—unless I'm too late."

For he knew that they had some hours the advantage of him in making a start; and what he began to dread most of all was that the schooner had put in and taken them off. And Titania—and Ann?

He left his horse in the ravine staked out to browse

and rest, saddle and bridle removed. He had come, like Fancher, straight up from the south for the last few miles and, like Fancher, had dismounted but a little way from the more southerly of the two sandy beached coves. Fancher's horse, though Bon had seen nothing of it, was not over five hundred yards from the spot where Bon had tethered his own.

He turned now, along a low line of cliffs, toward the beach; the steep upward path which Fancher had trod was the one Bon would take. He went swiftly, yet cautiously, his eyes suspicious of every possible lurking-place. He meant to give the surprise party himself, were there to be any; not to stumble into ambush. It was well to remember that he came here to pit himself single-handed against several men, men to whom he could look for the final act of desperation. He drew his revolver and carried it in his hand. He walked noiselessly.

From the low cliff-wall he found a way down where there was a ribbon of beach; here he ran less danger of being seen were any near to see. There was no sound of footfalls now, with the rush and swirl and backward and forward sweep of the ocean washing along at his side. He came swiftly about an angle of outjutting rock—and saw a man sitting on a fallen boulder hardly ten steps away! A man looking weary and dejected, slumping forward; a man of sagging muscles and, perhaps, of drooping spirit.

Bon paused, coming to a dead halt where he was, reconnoitring. The man had not seen him; did not see him now, as he faced toward the north. Yet there might be others; it was not yet full light down here. Something leapt up within him, something like a gleam

of light. He had guessed right. They were here. Titania and Ann were here!

Besides the one drooping figure he saw no one; save for himself and the man sitting on the rock the beach appeared deserted. Bon came on stealthily. He began to see his quarry more clearly now. Not Vickers, surely; not Mike Brady; not—Fancher! It was Fancher, the fat man! He, then, was one of them.

Fancher jerked about suddenly and started to his feet. Bon was so close to him now that he could have struck the man down with his hands. Instead he sprang upon him only to shove the muzzle of his revolver deep into Fancher's fat.

"One little whisper out of you," said Bon warningly, "and I'll kill you."

Fancher simply seemed to cave in and wilt, dropping back to his seat on the rock.

"Where's the rest of the crowd?" demanded Bon.

"Glory be!" gasped Fancher. "It's Mr. Bonord!"

"Answer me," Bon commanded him in cold fury.

"Where are the others?"

Fancher stared up at him like a great fat, unimaginative baby.

"What others? Who?"

"Who killed Leather Hide?" Bon asked him impatiently.

"Is he dead?—How should I know——"

"You'd better talk fast and talk straight, Fancher, while I'm of a mind to listen. Somebody killed him and ran for it. If it wasn't you, you're in on it somehow."

"I ain't in on it. I don't know a thing about it. I didn't——"

"What are you doing here, then?"

"I'm on my way," said Fancher. "I knew a boat was coming, to leave some hooch and scoot along. Me, I'm for that boat—if it ever comes!"

"You mean you're alone?"

"I mean I'm nothing else but alone!"

"What about Vickers and Brady and Marco and Tony?"

Fancher shook his head.

"Don't ask me. I ain't seen hide nor hair of any of 'em since I hit out——"

"Why the run for it to-night, Fancher? Why to-night instead of some other night?"

"Because I knew the boat——"

"You're lying to me, Fancher!" and Bon drove the gun barrel still deeper into Fancher's fat.

"I ain't lying," wailed the fat man. "I swear——"

"Answer me this and tell me the truth. Lie to me and if I have to follow you down to hell I'll get you for it!—Where are Titania and Ann?"

Here was a fresh implication, a bit of news hinted that Fancher had had not the slightest inkling about; his attitude, his look dimly seen, the ring of his voice no less than his words themselves was convincing of his ignorance here if not of his innocence elsewhere. Bon cut short his denial of any, even vaguest knowledge.

"If you don't mind," said Bon, "I'll frisk you for your gun and then——"

Fancher sprang up and attempted to draw off.

"I haven't a gun on me! I swear it!"

"Then why object to being looked over?"

"I—I—Oh, shoot!" moaned Fancher. "A man don't

like being all pawed over. I—" He was looking wildly about; if ever a man wanted to break and run for it, it was Amos Fancher now.

"There's something dead wrong about you, my friend," snapped Bon, angry and suspicious. "Better mind your eye. A murder has just been committed; that's one thing. My sister Ann and Titania are missing; that's another! Do you happen to think I'd mind in the least shooting you down for the dog that you are? *Now stand still!*"

With his left hand he began a quick searching through Fancher's pockets. Nor was his search without success. In Fancher's right hip pocket was a thirty-eight automatic. Bon flipped it out to a quick dive into the black waters.

"Liar!" he grunted.

"Well," gasped Fancher, "now you've got it, what else——"

"*Shut up!*" It was only a whisper yet all the pent-up savagery of a night of tremendous emotional conflict made the enunciation deadly.

What else did Bon seek? He himself did not know; something, if luck was with him, that might give him an inkling of the true state of affairs, that might somehow link Fancher clearly with what had happened and was happening. Was all Fancher's electric eagerness to avoid search because of an automatic which he wanted to keep? Bon meant to know.

He emptied the fat man's pockets, letting odds and ends of trivial personal belongings dribble to the sand. He came to something in a coat pocket, something which felt through the cloth like a small packet.

"It's only my can of tobacco," Fancher grumbled.

"You'll let a man have his tobacco, won't you, Mr. Bonord?"

"Yes; you can have you smokings, Fancher. But we'll just make sure."

It was a tobacco-box, all right; the ordinary tin of a cheap popular brand. Bon had it in his hands now. He had seen many like it, in the hands of pipe smokers. Leather Hide, for one, always carried a box like this. But there were many other men who did; there was nothing in the appearance of the mere box itself to suggest Leather Hide.

Bon stood a moment, holding it thoughtfully in his hand. He was not thinking about it at all! he was trying to place Fancher in his mind, to find his connection with what had happened back there at Leather Hide's cabin. Had he been wrong all along? Was Fancher the man? Had Vickers and his associates been innocent of the whole thing? Was it, after all, a one-man job, and Fancher the one man? If he was alone here, as he seemed to be, and evidently on the run, why not? Then Titania and Ann? Perhaps they were long ago safe at home!

How could Fancher know what Bon Ord thought? He saw Bon standing very still, the tobacco-box in his hand; Bon appearing, as he was, deep in his own meditations. Fancher shifted uneasily; for a moment he seemed to gather himself as if about to spring; again he relaxed flabbily with a low moan. He was enduring torture. It was a very long moment for Fancher.

"Take your tobacco," grunted Bon and tossed the box carelessly to him.

Fancher snatched at it wildly. Too wildly! The box struck the side of his open palm; Fancher fumbled; he was like a clumsy juggler learning his trick. In the

end he caught it; there was the sound of a windy sigh of relief.

And there was another sound, not loud but very distinct. The sound of something rattling gently in Fancher's tobacco-box. Bon, alert in every nerve, heard it; it flashed over him that Fancher was unduly eager to have it back. And then, like a great flash of light, the truth! Leather Hide's tobacco-box! Fool not to have thought of it sooner.

"Hand it over, Fancher. I'll have another look at it!"

Fancher tried to laugh off his suggestion. But he, too, had heard the telltale rattle of something that most surely was not tobacco. Luck, the rarest luck of his life, had been with him to-night. And now to have so little a thing, so unnecessary a mishap, wreck the most glorious dream of his life. He surrendered the tobacco-box because he was afraid to refuse. Actually tears ran down the creases of his face.

Bon's examination was of the briefest. Under a covering of pipe tobacco was ample incentive for a score of crimes.

With a strange and terrible cry, like the half-stifled utterance of a strangling man, Fancher sprang toward him.

"They're mine! Mine, you interfering fool! They never were Hyde's; he stole the first and the most of them. Mine, I tell you!"

Bon's fist struck him square between the close, crafty eyes, lifted him off his feet and put him on his back on the beach. Bon leaped forward as Fancher was hurled backward and stood over him menacingly.

"So you're the man that killed him, after all!"

Fancher lay still and looked up at him. Either the

one blow had jolted all of the fight out of him, or Bon's curt accusation together with the obviousness of the fact that to-night's game and that game's loot was irretrievably lost to him, brought him to his senses. And now, all of a sudden no longer belligerent but in haste to be free of that deadly suspicion which was sure to affix itself to any man with the murdered man's possessions upon him, Fancher burst into swift explanation. He sat up, making no attempt to rise, and with one hand to his head protested:

"Not me; I didn't have a thing to do with it. I just saw my one chance to get what they was after, and I took it. It was Vickers and Mike Brady and the two wops. So help me, Mr. Bonord, by all that's good and holy—that's the truth."

Clearly the man was frightened; it was equally clear that he would tell any lie to save his own neck. Yet from the beginning Bon was ready to believe him. Fancher's own words of only a week ago remained in his mind: "I'm a bad egg, all right, but I don't go 'round goring people!" And from the beginning Bon had sensed the hand of Vickers in this.

"Tell me everything you know about it," he commanded. "You've got sense enough to know how the thing looks and how it would look to a jury. No string of lies you ever told will get you out of the mess you're in right now."

"Don't I know it? Haven't I got any sense? Ain't that why I'm telling you the truth of it—so help me——"

"Do you know anything at all about my sister and Titania?"

"A little; not much, though." Still sitting, his hands

now at his sides in the sand, propping him up, Fancher hastened on: "I was in the house; hid in a big kitchen closet behind some boxes and stuff. I wasn't the only one that had the hunch Hyde was going to grab his pile and hike out. He knew I knew a lot; he knew Vickers and those other night-hawks was getting wise he was a walking gold mine. Most of all, I guess, he was scared of me. And I guess I figured things out about the same as the other guys did; that there might be a chance to catch him full-handed just before he did his big sneak."

"You mean you were going to kill him—and didn't?"

"No such thing!" cried Fancher hastily. "I was only going to make him split with me. I was going to up and say, when I spotted him with the goods on, 'Looky here, Mr. Hyde, them ain't yours! A young widow woman come out to you a good many years back, her name being Constance, with her little girl name of Titania; and *she* had emeralds. Why not? Her husband was a jewel merchant. He died, leaving her slathers of money and some real fancy stones. What happens? She has two no-'count brothers, both playing the stock-gamble game and aplaying it wild, if you ask me. They lose; she stakes 'em. Lose again; 'nother stake. Easy lose, easy get more. They get in bad and worse. Hooch-hounds, too, before they get through. Constance is getting busted and she's getting worried. She says nay-nay when they come at her again. Being just brothers and sister, what happens? They try to make her; they scare her half to death. They know she's got money, or anyhow what's as good as money. She's scared and

worried and half sick, I guess. She beats it where they won't find her. Why hit for this part of the world? Because it's good hiding up here, if you want to know. Besides, she knew the place. The ranch that's Mr. Hyde's—I mean was his—belonged to her uncle long ago and as a little girl she'd been there. She'd known Hyde, too, when they both was a lot younger, and folks didn't know what a bad one he could turn out to be. So she comes, thinking he's married and she'll board with 'em a little spell. Now the rest; I don't know all about it; me, I ain't a man to pry in other people's business. But Hyde was not so bad, fifteen-twenty years ago; and he ever was slick and forceful. The end was she, being sick and lonesome and scared, married him; married secret and Hyde let on it was done before she come along with her kid. She died; Hyde being dead now, nobody can tell why she cashed in. But she did—and he got the swag!"

He had the whole story out in a rush; eager at first, then almost frantic, to clear himself of all suspicion, he took a deep necessary breath and dived again into the stream of his tale.

"So I holed up in his closet, meaning to jump him at the proper time and get a share; I knew I was taking chances but I'm used to that. I heard somebody coming, just a little after dark. I thought at first it was him. Then I made out it was the two young ladies you're asking about. They came in, creepy-mousy style and I haven't got it doped out yet just what they was up to, unless it's to spy on Mr. Hyde like I'm busy doing. Anyways, they go in her room and they lock the door and go on fooling around, and

finally I make out they're up in the attic! And just about that time in come Mr. Hyde. Which is the last I know of *them*; might be up there yet, for all of me."

"What happened?" demanded Bon, impatient for the sum total of the fat man's knowledge.

"I had a peek-hole in the closet. And I had something else! Four loose planks in the partition, which is to say loose at the bottom, though nailed at the top. What happened? Why, Mr. Hyde locks the doors and has the windows plugged up tight as a drum—as he thought—then he flops down in his chair and fills his pipe. I can see him fine from where I'm holed-up in the next room. Then he pours out his tobacco and out comes a pile of emeralds that—" Fancher groaned and for a little while sat bowed down, his face in his hands.

"Go ahead, man! What next?"

"He showed signs of getting nervous. He'd just got everything back in his tobacco-box and I'm about ready to pull my loose boards back and step in on him, making him my proposition, when boom goes somebody's cannon. Those other guys had crept along outside; they'd found a knot-hole or they'd made a auger-hole on purpose. Anyhow, they drilled him clean and I saw it. He stiffens in a funny way and makes a last grab at his old tobacco-box. He misses it and knocks the lamp clean off the table. It goes dark. I can hear the other guys outside; they're working at a window and will come spilling in in two shakes. Then it's my chance. Do I take it?"

Fancher grunted. Then sighed and continued:

"I'm in that room first, two jumps ahead of the first of their crowd. In the dark I make just one swipe and

gather in the old tobacco-box. Then I pull back toward my hole in the wall. They're all in then and they're nervous themselves and sort of quiet-like. One man says, whispering, 'Got it?' And me, being quick of mind, whispers back: 'Yes!' You see I don't want any lights lit! He says again, I think it's Vickers, but you can't tell much from a whisper like his: 'Who got it?' And me, thinking faster'n ever, whispers back: 'Me! I got it. Let's beat it.' And then, leaving them all pawing around, I sneak back to my loose boards, creep through, shove the boards back at the bottom, and mosey outside and to the horse Mr. Hyde had ready saddled for himself. And, just as I'm making a safe get-away, I hear them, outside too, by now, and shuffling along to their horses. I sit tight a minute; then I hear them riding one way—and I'm off another way. And that's the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but—so help me."

"You're sure the men were the Vickers outfit?"

"I couldn't see 'em in the dark, and a man can't make much of whispering voices. But there was three-four men—and who else would it be?"

"And they left the house without discovering the two girls?"

"They sure did. I'll swear to that."

"But the girls were gone when I got there. The door to Titania's room was broken down; the attic floor boards were pulled aside——"

"They could have gone back for something," said Fancher. "Most likely they did. Yes; they went back and caught the two girls, I guess." Now at last he rose to his feet, shook his head as though to dispel a certain dizziness, picked up his hat, and grumbled:

"If they did get 'em, I'd sure hate to be in those girls' shoes! Well, it's no business of mine and, if you're through shaking me down, I'm on my way, Mr. Bonord."

"Where?"

"Anywhere but here! I'm sick of this whole mess."

"Don't be an ass," snapped Bon. "You can't clean out that way, not after a thing like this that has just happened. What's more, you've no place you can go. My father has his net spread for you, and you can't break through. They'll get you, if I let you go—and you ought to be foxy enough to see that it will look better for you if you come voluntarily than if they get a rope over you while you're on the run. If you didn't kill Leather Hide, if your yarn is a true one, your one best bet to save your neck is to hand yourself over to me and to do what I tell you."

"You? Who're you? You're no sheriff——"

There was light enough for him to see the badge which Bon shoved before his eyes.

"I'm a deputy sheriff," Bon told him. "I'm not out looking for you this trip and I can't fool any more time away on you right now. You've got my word for it that we'll pull you down inside another twenty-four or forty-eight hours if you try to make a break for it. But I'll do this: If you're telling me the truth and if you come along quiet, I'll see that you don't swing for the killing of Leather Hide. Bolt for it and, innocent or not, it'll look bad for you. Remember I found you with the goods on you!"

It took Fancher not over ten seconds to come to a decision.

"What'll I do?" he asked sullenly. "Trot along with you?"

"No. Turn back to the first ravine; my horse is there and I advise you not to try to steal it and get away on it. You're more than likely to run into the sheriff, who's on his way here now. Go up the ravine to the top; then, on the ridge, keep straight on for half a mile. You'll come to a creek. Wait for me there.

"Never mind me! Do what I say. You've got what looks like a chance to sneak, I know. Try it and I've a hunch you'll hang. Suit yourself."

"I'll wait," cried Fancher eagerly.

Bon left him then without another word. At every moment the new day was brightening and he felt the need for haste. The men he sought might even now be up yonder on the cliffs. They might come, look out across the ocean, see that Burlock's craft was not in sight, and withdraw into the forest. So Bon hurried along the beach, came to the steep path and started to make the climb. Once he looked back; Fancher was not in sight. He shrugged and went on.

He came cautiously to the stone hut. It was very quiet here. The door stood open, the window-shade was up. With a keen glance all about, he stepped inside. No one here. Yet some one had been here recently. On the floor and on the table were perhaps a score of burnt matches; the lamp chimneys, usually kept spotlessly clean, were smoky. He went to the window and looked out. Wisps and streamers of mists clung to the gray depths and might be hiding Burlock's little schooner, but there was no sail in sight. From here one could not see either of the two little sandy coves; outjutting rocks hid both from view. Men might be down there, unseen; they might shout

and be unheard above the boom of the surf. Yet he knew that if those he sought were near, they, like himself, would select the cliff tops whence they might look far out to sea.

He left the cabin and, walking warily, turned into the rocky defile at the back. It led, as he knew, to a likely spot, high yet hidden. At one moment he seemed to tread a bleak and empty world alone and his heart was heavy within him; at the next, turning a sharp angle, an exultant, savage joy blossomed within him. He heard voices, low and guarded, yet distinctly audible since they were so near; he caught a fleeting glimpse of a man's hat and shoulders disappearing behind a big rock. Here was his quarry, in the high, hidden place he was approaching! Here too, unless life were to become of a sudden a hideous mockery, he would find Titania and Ann—safe!

He paused a moment only, then crept silently forward. He could ask for nothing better than this! To come on them in that little flat, ringed about by the ragged rocks; he'd keep himself sheltered, he'd have them in the open! Two minutes would bring him to the rude barricade—were there twice four, he'd have the drop on them; be they twice as desperate, he had a desperation to overreach their own.

It seemed to Bon that now, if never before, "he sat atop of the world!" He came to a place where his eyes and the muzzle of his revolver could peer through a narrow crevice, an irregular opening left between the monster flat rock lying across two of its brethren. A tremendous thankfulness went surging through him. There in full sight, close together, stood Titania and Ann. Vickers was talking quietly with Marco, not a

dozen steps from them, not a dozen steps from where Bon stood. Mike Brady and Tony sat listlessly on the sparse dry grass.

"I've got you dead to rights!" Bon shouted to them, his voice breaking in on them in a great, triumphant roar. "Move a finger, and I shoot to kill!"

He had come seeking four men; he found them, he had them in front of him. And so he counted the game his. He had not looked for the fifth man; he knew nothing of him. Nor did any of the others know. Yet that fifth man existed.

It was Burlock. He, too, feeling that something was wrong, had been stealing quietly among the rocks; he, too, in the first daylight, meant to know who it was that had lighted the signal lamps and where they had gone. As Bon stooped to peer in through the crevice, Burlock rose from behind a spire of rock close at hand. As Bon shouted out his threat, Burlock leaped and struck.

A stone turned under his foot. Bon swung about, suddenly aware of danger. A stout oaken cudgel was in Burlock's big hands. Bon saw, but saw one instant too late. Burlock struck and Bon Ord, at the very moment of victory, went down. There was no standing up under a blow like that. The world from daylight was plunged into the blackest midnight. He did not hear when Burlock, standing watchfully over him, called out. He did not see when Vickers came running and after Vickers, the others.

For Titania and Ann the new day had brought its glorious hope—and now all hope was dead.

CHAPTER XXIV

"BURLOCK!" gasped Vickers.

"Aye!" grumbled Burlock. "What devil's game are you up to this time, Vickers? And where's Jim Hyde?"

"Dead," answered Vickers, his story ready hours ago. "A run-in with the sheriff; a big raid and Leather Hide done for. And us on the run." He bent over Bon's quiet form, his face twisted with rage, "Didn't kill him, did you? I'll blow his head off——"

Burlock leaped forward and struck Vickers's arm up.

"No, you don't! Not until I know a bit more about all this; and not until my coat tails are clear of it. What's the game, I ask you, Vickers? And what about those two dames there?"

Vickers wheeled upon his following, and cursed and railed at them as at a pack of dogs.

"You fools, back on the run! Want those girls to make a break for it?"

Stronger with the hours had grown Vickers's dominance. The three men withdrew, going again to guard their prisoners.

"What about this man, then?" he demanded of Burlock. "Not being dead, he'll come to after a bit. He's best out of it."

"Who is he?"

"Young Ord. The sheriff's son."

"Sure," said Burlock, looking down thoughtfully at the white face. "I ought to have known him." Then he looked up curiously. "But I thought——"

"He's gone over to the other side, that's all. Look there; a deputy's badge!"

"I'll tie him up for you. Beyond that I won't go. You birds look to be in a bad hole. I'm not getting in alongside you."

Thoroughly set in his purpose, he began to cast about for a rope. Finding none available, he drew off his wide leather belt, cut it into strips swiftly and skilfully tied Bon's hands behind his back, and lashed his ankles together. Vickers picked up the fallen revolver and thrust it into his own belt.

"He might have another gun on him; we'll frisk him anyway," he said.

Burlock, an enormous, shaggy, and unkempt man, stood with hands on hips when he had done and watched Vickers curiously. He saw that Vickers, toward the end of his task, had found something—and squatted staring at it as though bereft of his senses. What a look to sweep across a man's face. And yet, for all that Burlock could make of it, it was only an old tobacco-box!

"What you got!" he demanded suspiciously.

Vickers laughed queerly and put the box into his pocket.

"Nothing much, you'd say," he answered lightly as he stood up. "But if you'd been all night without a smoke you'd be almighty glad to get your hands on the makings. Now, what are we going to do with him? Leave him here? Where, when he comes to, he'll be wise to all we do?"

For answer Burlock stooped and gathered the limp form up into his powerful arms.

"No. I'll carry him out of the way a bit. Where he won't see and won't hear."

Vickers went with him, back from the cliffs, along

a ridge and, at the end of a couple of hundred yards, to a logical spot to hide a man or a man's body. Here, at the headwaters of a little mountain creek, grew willows and alders, and behind their screen Burlock put down his burden.

"He won't wake up for a good long while," muttered Burlock, turning away. "I hit him hard. Now, let's know just what's what."

"Where's the schooner?" demanded Vickers quickly.

"Standing out to sea——"

"But why didn't you come in when I signalled?"

"Why didn't you flash the right signal the first time?"

The tale told in a few words, each understood that before Vickers lighted the lamps some other man had done so. Who? That became the burning question? Who but Bon Ord? So, perforce, they answered it.

"It's a mess anyway, and a bad mess," said Vickers nervously. "I tell you they raided Leather Hide. They're after us. Young Ord's already here. It would be like him to ride hard, ahead of the rest. But the rest will come! And your cursed boat is out at sea!"

"I can bring her back. Three smokes on the beach will do it."

They returned to Vickers's companions. Burlock's eyes were fixed on the two captives.

"You haven't explained them yet," he said curtly.

"In our getaway," lied Vickers swiftly, "we had a mix-up with a fly cop; government man he was. We hurt him; I don't know how bad. These girls saw. We're just keeping them where they can't tell tales until we get clean away. One of them is the sheriff's girl," he added after a second of hesitation. "We've

got a trump card in her. If he shows up, we make him be good, holding her. See?"

Burlock shrugged and laughed and turned away.

"I'm making the smokes," he said shortly. "I'm on my way! If you birds can climb aboard, well and good. It's not healthy here and I'm not spending any more time fooling around."

"Good!" cried Vickers. "We're with you."

A new fever was in his blood, his eyes looked to be the cavernous homes of leaping flames. For, though he could understand nothing of it, he knew that the glittering prize of murder done was in his pocket—and that none knew of it! His; his alone! And a smoke signal would bring back the little schooner.

"We'll hurry! We'll beat 'em to it! Good scout, Burlock."

Burlock grunted and turned into the steep path down to the beach. Vickers fell back a moment to explain what was to be done and to give orders to men who resented—and obeyed.

"We'll carry the girls with us down to the sea, to make sure. We'll leave them there when we go. There's not a chance in a hundred that any one will come in time to stop us now; not if we get a move on."

"You look glad enough to go all of a sudden," muttered Mike Brady. "Like you didn't care if we did go empty-handed."

"I'm glad enough of the chance to save my neck, you fool," retorted Vickers.

The sheriff and old Bill and Random, coming up from the landward side, dismounted and left their horses by a little creek. From here they would make the brief remaining distance on foot.

"Keep close behind me," commanded Ord. "You, Random, keep out a particular watch on the right. You, Merriweather, on the left. When you see one of the dogs—*get him!*"

"Teach your gran'mammy how to pick geese," growled old Bill.

Ord glared back at him but otherwise ignored him. If only he had Bon with him now! If only he had any two good men instead of this Random and old Bill! He would have chosen any other man or any other two men on earth!

"Wait until I get a drink," said old Bill and lay flat by the creek.

Close at hand was a green thicket. The old man saw it, peered into it with keen eyes, knowing that a man might lurk there in hiding—saw nothing and drank. Then he followed the others.

Ord was now fifty paces in front of him, Random close at his heels. Neither had waited. Old Bill grunted and hurried along, his claw-like hands moulded purposely about his rifle.

A sharp cry rang out; a man stood briefly revealed where he stood up, looking about, on a rock. In a flash he disappeared and a rattle of rifle-fire crashed through the stillness. The sheriff felt the wind of a bullet whistling by his ear.

"Down!" he roared. "Take to cover and let 'em have it!"

He leaped as he spoke, clear of the trail and into the shelter of one of the granite shafts. Random was quick to follow his example; and at their rear old Bill simply faded from sight. Sudden silence shut down again.

Behind their own natural barricade the outlaws crouched in the final clutch of desperation, each man with a rifle at his shoulder, each man with the knowledge in his heart that for him it was now or never. To reach the beach where Burlock had gone they would have to show themselves among the big scattered boulders or in the narrow rocky pass which led to the hut of stone. They had pulled the two girls down, threatening them with sudden death if they stirred; they then set themselves to the grim task, matching the task of their attackers, to drop the first man who showed himself.

"I guess old Bill's cut and run for it," the sheriff called softly but in high disgust to Random. "It's up to you and me—if you're not getting scared?"

Random made no answer. He thought that he saw something move, ever so slightly, ever so stealthily; something among the rocks straight ahead. He waited, tense and eager—then caught a clear glimpse of his man and fired. Shot for shot he was answered; he fell back into the shadow of his rock.

"Get him?" snapped the sheriff.

Nor did Random answer this time. He had at least winged his man; he was sure of it. But he, too, had been winged. For a moment he went dizzy and sick; the hot blood was running down his arm that was strangely numb and useless. The left arm, thank God! That was his first clear thought.

Then there burst out a fresh volley of rifle fire. Who was shooting, 'way off there to the right? What other man was taking a hand? He caught a glimpse of white hair and beard. Good old Bill! Cut and run for it, had he? He had crept close up, under their very noses!

Ord, seeing a man run from rock to rock, stood up and began pumping hot lead at him. As good as he sent was hurled back at him; bullets whined about his head like angry bees. He dropped his man; saw him get up and run on.

All shooting died away. A gust of wind whipped the acrid smell of powder clear from the air, bringing the spume of salt spray. Then, out of the silence, a voice shouted:

"Ord! I've got a word to say to you!"

"Vickers?" shouted Ord back at him. "Never a word, my boy, until you throw down your guns and——"

"I've got your girl here, Ord! Safe—so far!"

Ord grew rigid and as rigid did Random grow, as from the two men burst an eloquent: "Thank God!"

"We're going to take no more chances," cried Vickers desperately. "Stand off and let us get down to the beach, and we'll not touch her. Fire one more shot and I swear I'll drive a bullet into her. Yes, and the other girl, too. Take it or leave it, Ord; that's final."

John Ord sank back, white with rage and fear. He knew his desperate men, no man better; he knew what the ring of Vickers's voice meant. The man had said what he would do—and he would do it.

"You've got enough killing on your hands, Vickers," he shouted back sternly.

"Enough," yelled Vickers like a madman, "to know that we'd be no worse off if we killed a hundred more! If you take us now, you hang every man of us. Don't we know that? I've made you a proposition. Take it or leave it—but snap into it!"

Never in his life had John Ord gone out to get his

man and then let that man dictate to him. Never once had he cornered his man and failed to take him in.

But never had that man had his hands on John Ord's little daughter Ann!

"I'll tip you my hand," Vickers called after a moment. "There's a man on the beach lighting signal fires. The schooner will be coming in for him soon. He won't wait for us. You've got to make up your mind now."

Evidently then he had whirled upon his captives, the naked look of murder in his eyes. A shrill scream came from Ann:

"Dad!—He's going to kill us—Oh, dad!"

Ord leaped up, his decision made—forced on him.

"Have it your way, Vickers. Set the girls loose and I let you go free." He groaned out the last words and his teeth came together with a savage click. He suffered now as he had never done in his life.

"You promise that? And you'll command your men to hold off?"

"Yes."

"All right. Better see you keep that promise, Ord. No, I'll not set the girls loose here; they go with us down to tide-water. When we step in the boat, they stay behind."

He saw Random's white face staring at him wildly, a face smeared with blood where Random's hand had passed over it. What was it shining in Random's eyes? It looked mightily like rage and rebellion. Random was muttering; Ord could not catch the words:

"That devil—to lay his hands on Ann—and to go free——"

He saw, beyond Random, old Bill clawing at his beard.

"You two will do what I tell you to do!" shouted Ord, gripping his rifle threateningly. "You fools—can't you see it's the only way——"

Neither answered. They had turned away from him and saw four men huddled together, keeping their two captives between themselves and their attackers, moving toward the path dropping dizzily down to the beach. Beyond these fugitives they saw the wisps of smoke from Burlock's three signal fires, mounting up into the still air. They turned their eyes seaward.

Tears of rage started up in Random's eyes and rolled down his blood-smeared face.

"—No man shall ever set his hand on Ann—and go unpunished—not as long as I live——"

He was like a man gone stark mad yet holding himself back in some terrible grip; a man who fought for freedom to act even while he manacled himself. He saw Ann's face turned for an instant toward him; saw her helpless little gesture— Then she, with her captors, went down over the cliff.

"I gave my word," said Ord. "It couldn't be helped."

"No, you couldn't help yourself," said Random. He rose and came close. He added dully, "Hurt bad?"

"First I knew of it!" grunted Ord.

Random's left arm dangled uselessly. Ord had a cut cheek from which the blood ran freely; and he limped as he moved. Two wounds which he had noted only with the outer fringe of a consciousness devoted utterly to Ann—and Vickers.

"Old Bill's down, too," said Random. "Bullet in the leg. He's pretty badly hurt, I think—and *those men are to go free!* Did you see the rope they had tied around her—how they jerked her after them——"

"It can't be helped. It's the only way, I tell you. That's why I gave my word——"

"I didn't give mine!"

"But I did it for you!"

"They may trick us at the last minute! What if, when they get down to the beach, they decide to take the girls along? What could we do?"

"I've thought of that, too; we've just got to take the chance. We can't help ourselves."

"I'm going after them," said Random quietly. "Down another way, at the side. I'll——"

"You'll do nothing of the kind. When I give a man my word——"

Random dropped his gun then to strike with his right hand. A blow not in anger, yet with all his might. He struck impersonally, one might say. Here was an obstacle to be removed—and with the one blow he removed it. Sheriff Ord went down under the blow as Bon had dropped beneath Burlock's club. And then Random, picking up his gun again, ran forward, turned a little to one side and disappeared among the big rocks.

Of all this Bon Ord saw nothing. Consciousness returned swiftly to him and in a flash realization swept over him. He tried to rise and discovered his bonds. His head cleared and he fought with them in an access of fury. He had seen Titania, her face turned toward him; he had seen Ann. Those devils had them; he who should have saved them had gone down before their eyes like a log. And like a log he lay.

Of but one thing could he be sure: They had come here to escape by schooner. They might be going at any moment. And he lay here, bound!

Struggling wildly he managed to sit up. He fell afresh to straining at his bonds, more like a wild animal than a man. A man should know better. There was no breaking free——

He thought of Fancher! He lay by a creek—Fancher, had he obeyed orders, was by now hiding by this same creek! But how far away? Fully a half mile. Yet a half mile was not the greatest distance in the world! A man could inch along; he could roll and twist and travel a half mile—in the course of time! It would take hours.

He struggled again and surged to his feet only to lose his balance and fall heavily. He tried it again, more warily, and stood up. Now he could hop! Infinitely tedious work, yet even so, infinitely better than a mere wriggling! So he began his journey, praying frantically within himself that in the end he would come upon Fancher.

He was a long while going a hundred yards; he had fallen several times and had always to endure the age-long agony of getting up again, for along the steep bank, among the boulders he met nothing but obstacles. And then, all of a sudden, he saw a sight that brought hope rushing back into his breast. Yonder, through the trees, he glimpsed three horses—and one of them was Nabob! His father and Random and King Canute were here. He shouted to them.

No answer, though he called repeatedly. Then, drowning his voice, the crash of rifle shots! They were here; they were fighting—and he was not with them!

He started to turn back. But how long that would take! And, bound as he was, how be sure that, instead of bringing help, he was not hopping back into the

enemy camp? They'd see him long before he could see them. They weren't hopping about and falling with a crash and threshing around as he was——

"Nabob!" he called sharply. "Nabob, old boy!"

Nabob heard the beloved voice, tossed up his head and started forward at a trot—only to swing about at the end of a rope tethering him. Bon saw and groaned in despair.

"Oh, Nabob!"

The horse's shrill whinny answered him. Nabob backed off, imagined himself free, and trotted toward him—only to be jerked back the second time.

"Come on, old man," cried Bon, pleading as with one who must understand all that could be put into words. "I can't untie you; I'm tied up too. Come ahead, Nabob. Snap that silly rope—Nabob, Nabob!"

Nabob lunged, was whipped back, and shook his head savagely, as though to say, "It can't be done, my Master!" But Bon was still pleading and now trying to hop toward him. Among the rocks he fell again, calling despairingly as he went down:

"Nabob!"

Nabob ran back then, close to the tree to which he was tethered. He seemed to be gathering himself, the muscles rippling and bunching under his glossy hide. And here he came again—not at a trot but hurling himself headlong. And the rope snapped like a string and whipped about him like a snake as Nabob rushed to his master.

And now? Bon managed it, having Nabob to work with. He sprang to his horse's back, lying on his stomach across the saddle. If he could make Nabob understand, it would take them but a minute or two to get

to Fancher— If Fancher was there! How the *ifs* stood about him as thick as trees of the forest! He began to slip from the saddle while Nabob, never a horse so confused, began to fidget; whenever had his master lain like a sack of wheat across his back? Bon saved himself with a desperate wriggle; caught at the sweat-leather with his teeth and held grimly on. Throwing a knee forward to touch Nabob's shoulder, he gave him the first indication of the direction he was to take. Nabob snorted, trembled, then swung about. Another touch and he started down along the bank of the creek.

Fancher had obeyed orders. Now, mouth open and little eyes staring, he saw as strange a sight as he could well imagine; a man lying across a saddle, feet down on one side and head on the other, hands at his back—and biting leather to keep from falling. Fall he did at first sight of the fat man.

"Cut me loose—quick!"

Fancher jerked out his pocket knife and fell to work. Bon jumped to his feet, free and eager.

"Give me your gun——"

"You threw it in the ocean——"

Bon sprang again to Nabob's back and was off at a run. Empty-handed, if that was to be, none the less he'd take his part in this morning's adventure.

"Nabob, good old Nabob!" he fell to whispering as he raced back up along the stream.

He had heard rifle fire several times. It was very still now save for the eternal boom of ocean. He looked about and could see no one. But he did see three pillars of smoke rising from the beach below. A signal, clearly! Then they were on their way?

He knew the steep path dropping down from the

stone hut to the beach; he knew that if men were by any chance descending now they'd go that way. So, when he left Nabob's back again by the creek, he ran to find another way down, one to the south of the way they'd be going. He had only his bare hands—but he'd fill those hands with the weapons of the first man he came up with!

So, turning aside, he but narrowly missed seeing his father where he had pulled himself up to his feet after having gone down under Random's "impersonal!" blow. Dodging this way and that among the rocks, he began making his way down.

The sheriff, torn two ways, having seen Random vanish, started to do the only thing that he saw the way to do; to run to find old Merriweather and knock the rifle out of his hands, were it necessary; to run on to the cliff top and shout a warning to Vickers—and thus to force Random back. He made his best speed—only to arrive too late.

It seemed then that everything happened all at once, in one blinding second. Bon had seen no one, heard no one, until he was almost down at the beach. Then he both heard and saw those whom he longed so hotly to come to grips with. It was a ten-foot drop down to the firm white sand—and there, just below him, coming about a shoulder of cliff, were Vickers and Marco, with Titania between them. In silence and in fury Bon hurled himself straight down upon them, striking as he went at the nearest man. It was Marco and Marco fell under him, half stunned.

Vickers whirled and up went his hand, his weapon gleaming in the new sun's rays. There was a distant

report, faint and far off, from the top of the biggest rock at the top of the cliffs, near by, there was a soft thud. Vickers, with a bullet in his brain, dropped in his tracks. And from the cliff tops came a wild shrill scream of devilish joy. Old Bill, dancing about on one leg, was shrieking at the top of his lungs:

"Right between the eyes, or I'm a liar! A good two hundred yards, too! Step it off and see! Drilled him clean, I did!"

Ord leaped up on him and dragged him down.

"Come down, you old fool! Didn't you hear me tell them——"

"I didn't promise 'em, not me," cackled old Bill. "And I wouldn't give a dang if I had! Drilled him clean, Johnny— Why, that's Bon Boy knockin' the daylights out'n 'em. And— Ranny, Ranny! There goes Ranny! Go after 'em, Ranny! Eat 'em up, Ranny!"

Then Ord at his side saw what he saw. Random, like Bon, finding his own way down the cliffs, had seen Ann. Mike Brady and Tony had her between them and were hastening her along, down to catch up with Vickers and Marco. Random bore down on them with a booming roar, his left arm dangling but his right handling his gun, which spat angrily as he went. Both Mike and Tony were firing back at him, yet Random never stopped. Nor did his wild shots find a target. But, hurling himself along and downward, he was upon them. The rifle barrel came crashing down on Mike Brady's head; Tony was firing from close quarters, now.

But Bon had finished with his man, Marco. He

caught up Marco's falling rifle and fired just in time. Tony, with a broken arm, started to run. Bon drew a fine bead on him—then lowered the rifle.

"Can't do it—not when he's running," he grunted disgustedly.

And then turned and caught Titania in his arms.

Of the stone hut they made that day a little emergency hospital. With saddle blankets for cots, John Ord lay at one side and on the other old Bill. Random insisted on sitting outside—he and Ann.

"Tell you, Johnny Ord," said old Bill with a rare old grin, "we've had quite a day of it, huh? I'm going to give a little celebration party. Think you might arrange to come?"

A strange new look was in the sheriff's eyes.

"I'd come, Bill," he said shortly, "game leg and all, if I had to walk a thousand miles."

Old Bill cackled mirthfully.

"Drilled him neat, didn't I? Knew I could do it. Well, about my party now; mind if I ask Ranny? You and Ranny ain't been what a man would call chummy—Mind if I ask him to come?"

Random's voice and Ann's came to them from outside. John Ord flushed, but a bright light leaped up in his eyes.

"I wouldn't come, Bill, unless you did invite Random!" he answered emphatically.

"I'll tell you all about it," said Bon, and told Titania all he had heard from Fancher. And then he poured into her lap the glittering contents of an old tobacco-box. The emeralds rippled forth like a cool translucent

forest waterfall, flashing back the light from a hundred gleaming facets. Yet she shrank back from them.

"I don't want them, Bon. You take them. And tell me——"

He did. In whispers. It was to be called, now, Titania's Honeymoon Isle. The house would be started right away, the specially constructed boats made ready. There were those swans—and ducks——

"Silly giggle-gaggle geese!" yelled old Bill joyously.

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